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By

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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of
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A Digital Learning Resource to Enrich Undergraduate Students' Appreciation of
Aboriginal Canadian Literature

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degree of Master of Design.

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Designing A Digital Learning Resource to
Enrich Undergraduate Students' Appreciation
of Aboriginal Canadian Literature

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Designers cannot view their communications from the perspective of those for whom they design, but they can make informed decisions when approaching a design problem based on shared experience or values with the people for whom they are designing. When designers are less familiar with the values and beliefs of the group or individual, the task becomes more difficult. In Canada, non-Aboriginal designers frequently work with Aboriginal groups on design projects, but no case studies were found that discuss the complexities of this working relationship in detail.

A prototype for a digital learning resource was developed for a course offered to first year Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this study was to raise important considerations for non-Aboriginal designers working in similar contexts and to develop a prototype that explores how linked digital media can enrich students' appreciation of Aboriginal Canadian Literature.

In addition to a literature review, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Aboriginal students and instructors. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics from the University of Alberta were also interviewed from the following disciplines: Aboriginal Capacity and Developmental Research Environments, Aboriginal Student Services (formerly Native Student Services), the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program, Anthropology, Art History, Design, Educational Policy Studies, English and Film Studies and the Transition Year Program. An additional session with students was conducted, where a variety of images and image styles were shown to discuss image preference and culturally appropriate image use in the prototype. The design criteria developed, and a preliminary paper prototype are discussed and suggestions for further necessary testing are described. Future directions of research are also identified.

The purpose of the study is to explore design processes, in a cross-cultural design context, in order to develop a resource which may enrich undergraduate Aboriginal students' appreciation of Aboriginal Canadian literature. The intent of this thesis report is to raise questions and considerations that are vital to designing in a cross-cultural context.

This document describes the process of designing a digital learning resource for an undergraduate Aboriginal Canadian literature course. A paper prototype of the resource was designed as a result of the research conducted. The focus of this study is on the early stages of the Visual Communication Design process leading up to the development of a paper prototype.

The learning resource is based on *English 114: Aboriginal Literature and Culture* a compulsory Aboriginal Canadian literature course in the Transition Year Program (TYP) at the University of Alberta. The TYP program is for Aboriginal undergraduate students and is designed to prepare them for admission into one of eight faculties at the University. There is a wide range of students in this program, some with extensive contact with their Aboriginal communities and heritage and some with little or no contact. Extra tutorial support is included in every class, to aid in the transition to post-secondary study (University of Alberta, 2004). The material used in *English 114* comes from Aboriginal authors from diverse communities in North America. Many different forms of literature are studied including poetry, prose and oral literatures. *English 114* is a full-year course that is offered in three different course sections, each with a different instructor. An average of twenty students is enrolled in each of those three sections.

Visual Communication Design

"The visual communication designer works on the interpretation, organization, and visual presentation of messages."—Frascara, 2004, p. 3

According to Frascara (1997) design is "concerned with the construction of visual messages meant to affect the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of people." (p. 5) It is an interdisciplinary profession that requires designer to research subjects outside of their field or to work collaboratively with professionals from other disciplines.

While many inroads have been made, by various institutions, to foster understanding of Aboriginal cultures in Canada and America, images created by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal designers found in mainstream media fall far behind. The purpose of visual communication design is to create effective communications that can "affect the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of people" (Frascara, 1997, p. 5) If designers can affect people with the communications they create, then they could play an important role in preventing visual stereotyping of Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

Designers can also play an important role in creating culturally appropriate visual materials developed in cooperation with Aboriginal clients. The effectiveness of communications developed and used in an educational setting can have a direct impact on students' experience of a course. The designer's contribution to the proposed digital learning resource could have a significant influence on the success or failure of the student's experience of the course.

This study explores collaborative design processes in order to develop considerations for designers working in a cross-cultural context. There have been many attempts to create methodologies for visual communication design, but the characteristics of the discipline make it difficult to develop predictable methodologies or processes. Poggenpohl (2004), states that in collaborative design projects: "What appears to be simple and logical on paper is often a messy practice in reality." (p. 146) Attempts at consolidating one theory of design have been difficult. This thesis is not an attempt to establish theories of design, but it is an exploration of this "messy practice" of collaboration. It will suggest that what is most important to the practice of design is how all of the unpredictable characteristics of the design context shape processes for creating effective communication.

Note: Visual communication design will hereafter be referred to as "design."

Background

A successful working relationship between a designer and client, or researcher and research participant, should be based on mutual trust. One way to begin to establish trust is to make motivations and intentions transparent, and to address any concerns from partners in research. Therefore, it is necessary to explain the reasons for selecting this topic. It is important to explain all of them in order to understand of the approach to the subject matter.

One objective of this research is to increase awareness and understanding of Aboriginal cultures in Canada. It also stems from the view that the perpetuation of stereotypes, misinformation and general ignorance of Aboriginal cultures in Canada is a serious concern. Some academics take the view that commenting on those who are different from themselves is a form of cultural appropriation (Hulan & Warley, 1999–2000). Alcoff (1991–1992) describes this stance as the “retreat position” in her essay the problem of speaking for others. Pursuing this type of investigation and risking error may be preferable to assuming this “retreat position.”

A necessary part of this study was to complete research on Aboriginal cultures and history in Canada, no claims are being made of expertise in this area. This project was undertaken to create a resource which could potentially benefit Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta who study Aboriginal literature.

Some individuals believe that design work for Aboriginal communities should be done by Aboriginal people in order to further the process of decolonization, but this is not always possible nor is it always the best solution for every situation because the person best suited to work on a project with an Aboriginal community may not always be Aboriginal. Collaborative work between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people can and should foster understanding, appreciation and awareness between cultures and communities.

Use of Terminology

An attempt has been made to use respectful and inclusive language throughout this document. Any terminology introduced in addition to the terms explained below will be defined later in the document.

Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, Native Canadian

Although there are many accepted terms used to define these groups, it is important to understand any associations, negative or positive, which accompany them, and also to understand how their use changes in different regions of Canada. The term Aboriginal is used predominantly in this document to refer to Indigenous peoples in Canada because the term Aboriginal is used in the title of the selected course (*English 114*) and because it seems to be a term commonly used in Alberta. Other terms like Indigenous, First Nations and Native Canadians may be used occasionally, but only when referencing literature that uses these different terms. While it seems common in the United States, the use of the term Indian is not used, unless in reference to literature that uses the term, because it can be viewed as offensive and disrespectful to Aboriginal people.

Oral literature

Oral literature is an important component of the selected course. Oral literature of Canadian Aboriginal peoples includes formal narrative, informal storytelling, political discourse, song and prayer (Petrone, 1990).

Digital Learning Resource

In this context digital learning resource refers to a computer resource that is meant to complement or enrich an existing curriculum. This resource is not intended to achieve measurable learning outcomes.

Bicultural Research

Smith (1999) refers to bicultural research as research where Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers work together to shape a project.

Cross-cultural, Intercultural and Multicultural

Many terms have been used when referring to multiple cultures, but there are important distinctions to be made in order to use them appropriately in this research context. Different disciplines use various terms with different intentions and meanings; thus, it is important to define or discuss terminology.

Communication theorists have clearly determined definitions when referring to communication and cultures. Within the discipline of communication theory, intercultural communication is seen as the study of communication between individuals or groups who are members of different cultural groups (Infante, 1990). Cross-cultural communication refers to a comparison of the intercultural communication behaviour of different cultures (Infante, 1990). Therefore, cross-cultural communication would include a comparison of communication strategies of two or more different cultural groups. Multiculturalism is defined by Jandt (2001) as understanding, acceptance and constructive relations among people of many different cultures and subcultures.

The meaning of the term “cross-cultural” in the field of design is not as universally understood as it is in other disciplines. An examination of current views and specific case studies reveals that there is confusion in the field as to whether cross-cultural design is a philosophy, a style, a political mandate or a marketing strategy (Bowen, 2000). When the understanding of “cross-cultural design” is so subjective, an explanation of terminology seems necessary.

When viewed as a style, cross-cultural design and multicultural design are terms often used to refer to the mix of multiple visual languages from different cultures. However, it appears that in most of the literature cross-cultural design refers to designers working on projects for individuals or groups who are members of cultures other than their own, whether or not this includes a mixing of visual languages (Steiner & Haas, 1994). Cross-cultural and multicultural are often used interchangeably in the discipline of design.

An examination of a recognized design institution’s definition of cross-cultural design can further clarify some common understandings of the term. The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) formed the Center for Cross-Cultural Design in the 1990s. The Center’s Manifesto defines cross-cultural design as communication

between designers and clients from different cultures, but adds that cross-cultural design can be defined as communication between designers from different cultures ("AIGA Cross-Cultural Design Manifesto," 1999). The manifesto focuses, to some extent, on the need for designers to recognize the importance of cross-cultural design in global business markets. However, the manifesto also states: "Seeking mutual understanding between peoples and cultures can only lead to greater peace in the world." ("AIGA Cross-Cultural Design Manifesto," 1999, ¶15) This also suggests that members of this organization view cross-cultural design as a philosophy and political statement. It seems reasonable to conclude from the manifesto that this well recognized institution views cross-cultural design as a philosophy, a political mandate and a marketing strategy.

Whatever the varied interpretations of cross-cultural design may be, it appears that its meaning and purpose rely on specific contexts and on the interpretations of individual designers. For the purposes of this research "cross-cultural design" will refer to a design context in which design is being undertaken for a cultural group that is different from that of the designer, but it will also refer to a context in which design needs to communicate to multiple cultures. The objective of this research is to explore processes or strategies for developing appropriate visual communications in a cross-cultural context. Whether or not this approach contributes to the development of a political mandate or philosophy is best left open.

The use of the term "cross-cultural design" in this context is not interchangeable with the term "global marketing" and there are several reasons for this decision. First, the term "global" relies on a fairly narrow definition of culture as linked to geographic location and nationality. Second, the term "marketing" associates design with marketing and commerce, when the practice of design has several applications beyond commercial ones. Finally, this research does not associate cross-cultural design with marketing strategy because of the wish to avoid connecting this study to commercial motivations.

Infante (1990), a communication theorist, provides a broader definition of culture as the traditions and patterns of thought which are passed down through generations of people. This definition of culture broadens the scope of cross-cultural design to the point that any design context could become a cross-cultural design context. This may be broadening the field too much, but the narrow scope that is created when using cross-cultural design interchangeably with the term "global marketing", reduces the importance and complexity of this kind of design.

As stated above, in the field of design there is no clearly defined theoretical framework with which to understand cross-cultural design. It can be helpful to turn to communication theory in order to further understand some accepted theories, but interpretations of cross-cultural design remain subjective.

Cross-cultural Resources

Prior to any discussion of the need for a digital learning resource for this course, it is important to clarify the particular characteristics of this cross-cultural endeavour. The cross-cultural context here involves communication between a non-Aboriginal designer and Aboriginal research participants, but it also involves communication to

multiple cultures and between multiple cultures through the resource. Because some Aboriginal students only have an experience of Western culture, and because some authors studied in *English 114* use Western conventions in their writing, the resource should represent conventions of Western cultures and Aboriginal cultures visually.

Research Design

Approach to Research: Respecting Other Cultures

“Knowledge of one another, and a sharing of wisdom, are essential to a true partnership of peoples.” —Report of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Arts and Heritage, ¶10

According to Smith (1999) research and its outcomes, in a cross-cultural context, should be carefully negotiated. In Canada, and throughout the world, research has had a negative impact on Indigenous people. A researcher, then, must acquire an understanding of this history and how this can affect relationships, in the present, especially in a cross-cultural context. When research occurs across cultures or between minority cultures the power dynamic that is created should be recognized (Smith, 1999). Researchers have the power through their research to do benefit or harm to their research participants, either directly, or indirectly.

When forming a successful working relationship, a designer or researcher should take the time to get to know and understand the client or research participant and their needs. However, when varying cultural backgrounds and multiple cultures need to be represented, as is the case in this context, this becomes a more complex task. Approaching the literature review, and being unfamiliar with Aboriginal cultures in Canada, involved research in several subject areas and disciplines, including: Aboriginal worldviews, history, pedagogy and issues involved in cross-cultural research with Aboriginal peoples. Recognized texts, written by Aboriginal scholars, were reviewed with a view to understanding multiple perspectives on the topics noted above. In order to refine the bibliography for this study, Aboriginal academics with experience in this area were consulted.

Two important caveats to the following discussion of the research are necessary. First, in this context, reviews of literature should be conducted in conjunction with other methods of research because the literature review cannot provide all of the necessary information to create a visual design that is culturally appropriate. Second, a literature review should only be viewed as a small component of any attempt to learn how to design for other cultural groups because interaction with research participants is a critical to creating effective communications.

The history of research in many fields has proven the dangers of simple and naïve assumptions that can result from presuming that reading texts alone can transform an individual into an expert on a culture. Perhaps design researchers focused on practice will be knowledgeable enough to avoid becoming “armchair designers,” but it is important always to remind oneself of the complexities of the research. Certainly this review of literature is a preliminary step in a process that will not necessarily result in expertise, but will result in an increased awareness and a more informed practice.

Understanding Worldview

For a designer a first step, in trying to increase awareness and understanding about an unfamiliar culture is to learn more about the worldview (beliefs and values) of the group. Constructs of these worldviews involve beliefs about the natural world and assumptions about human nature (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). One challenge in working in a cross-cultural context with Aboriginal cultures is that this worldview can be quite different from the Western worldview.

Some general characteristics are common to many definitions of Western and Aboriginal worldviews. From these commonalities we can begin to note important differences that can affect the design approach, especially when deciding on research methods. Barnhardt (2000) adapts research from Knudtson and Suzuki to create a chart that succinctly summarizes some characteristics of the two worldviews:

Indigenous Worldview

- spirituality is embedded in all elements of the cosmos
- humans have responsibility for maintaining harmonious relationships with the natural world
- need for reciprocity between human and natural worlds – resources are viewed as gifts
- nature is honoured routinely through daily spiritual practice
- wisdom and ethics are derived from direct experience with the natural world
- universe is made up of dynamic, ever changing natural forces
- universe is viewed as a holistic, integrative system with a unifying life force
- time is circular with natural cycles that sustain all life
- nature will always possess unfathomable mysteries
- human thought, feelings and words are inextricably bound to all other aspects of the universe
- human role is to participate in the orderly designs of nature
- respect for elders is based on their compassion and reconciliation of outer-and inner-directed knowledge
- sense of empathy and kinship with other forms of life
- view proper human relationship with nature as a continuous two-way transactional dialogue

Western Worldview

- spirituality is centered in a single Supreme Being
- humans exercise dominion over nature to use it for personal and economic gain

- natural resources are available for unilateral human exploitation
- spiritual practices are intermittent and set apart from daily life
- human reason transcends the natural world and can produce insights independently
- universe is made up of an array of static physical objects
- universe is compartmentalized in dualistic forms and reduced to progressively smaller conceptual parts
- time is a linear chronology of “human progress”
- nature is completely decipherable to the rational human mind
- human thought, feelings and words are formed apart from the surrounding world
- human role is to dissect, analyze and manipulate nature for own ends
- respect for others is based on material achievement and chronological old age
- sense of separateness from and superiority over other forms of life
- view relationship of humans to nature as a one-way, hierarchical imperative (Barnhardt, 2000, p. 170)

Many of the characteristics, from each of the two worldviews noted above, are broad generalizations which are open for debate, but they are part of a larger body of evidence which demonstrates that Western and Aboriginal worldviews have some very different beliefs at their cores. These differences have often created barriers to understanding, but most importantly, many aspects of the Western worldview defined above, have had a negative and destructive impact on Aboriginal cultures (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). The greatest difficulty in understanding these differences is in respecting differences without seeing them as conflicting.

This type of comparison, constructed by an Aboriginal scholar, can aid in understanding an Aboriginal worldview, but it can also further a process of uncovering assumptions and beliefs inherent in the Western worldview as seen from an Aboriginal perspective (Battiste & Henderson, 2000).

This type of analysis can be useful in understanding some general beliefs and values that the majority of Aboriginal cultures hold. However, grouping these cultures together as “Aboriginal peoples” does not necessarily mean that these varied cultural groups possess shared goals any more than English and French citizens do as members of the European community (Booth, 2003).

Certainly there may be some characteristics that are Western or Aboriginal, as the comparison noted above points out, but they are not comprehensive definitions of cultures that are inclusive of all aspects of Western or Aboriginal cultures. (Booth, 2003) The potential danger is that if we concentrate too much on defining Aboriginal cultures by a set of shared meanings it makes it difficult to recognize the diversity among the many cultures represented by this term (Battiste & Henderson, 2000).

Of key importance in any approach to understanding other cultures is the need to avoid generalization of the culture (Eigenbrod & Episkenew, 2002). Perceiving Aboriginal cultures in North America as homogenous is as incorrect as viewing European cultures or Asian cultures as homogenous. The fact that this is probably not obvious to the majority of North Americans is evidence of the degree of ethnocentrism present in North American society today.

Aside from the dangers of viewing Aboriginal cultures as homogenous, there is also the danger that these generalizations lead to the perception that they are static, or timeless (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Many well known Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars explain that this view tends to encourage the paternalistic treatment of Aboriginal cultures by Western cultures. Not only does this lead to a simplification of Aboriginal cultures, but it also leads to the ethnocentric belief that in order for Aboriginal cultures to “progress” they will need to adopt Western cultural attributes (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). The injustices and abuses that occurred in residential schools provide one example of this kind of misguided thinking.

A misguided, although perhaps well-meant, belief that results from this kind of generalization is the belief that any change in the culture might lead to the demise of the culture (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). All cultural groups adapt and change over time to the context in which they exist and it is unrealistic and naïve to assume that in order to help preserve cultures, one needs to attempt to prevent them from changing. One important aspect of Aboriginal worldview, that appears repeatedly in different sources, is the importance and respect given to nature by Aboriginal cultures.

Research Considerations and Guidelines

Considerations

There is no shortage of literature in academia concerning research with Aboriginal communities and individuals, but there is little consensus as to any particular methodology that has proven more successful than any other. A survey of sources written by Aboriginal authors highlights some key considerations.

Given the history of academic research and its negative effect on Aboriginal groups it is not surprising that it is a sensitive topic. When approaching research with, and for, an Aboriginal group it is important to be aware of ethical guidelines involving research, but it is also important to understand some individuals’ perspectives regarding academic research. Linda Smith summarizes a common perspective in *Decolonizing Methodologies*: “The term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, “research”, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.” (Smith, 1999, p. 1)

Due to the negative history of academic research with Aboriginal communities, non-Aboriginal researchers should explain the motivation behind their research, and how it will benefit the group or person with whom they are researching. The damage that has been done as a result of the belief in knowledge for knowledge’s sake should be understood by researchers (Menziés, 2001). Many Indigenous scholars believe

that Eurocentric worldviews have traditionally put the accumulation of knowledge ahead of the interests of the individual or community being studied (Menzies, 2001). Many Aboriginal scholars, express the concern that research studies stem from simple curiosity, or in the case of a graduate student, from an interest in obtaining grant money (Mihesuah, 1998).

Research Guidelines

In the following discussion, the term “community” is used by various sources in the discussion of research guidelines. Before any analysis of these sources is possible, a brief explanation of the term “community,” for the purposes of this research study, is necessary.

A community is defined in this document as a group that shares a common interest. This definition is not limited to geographic location. Common interests in this context include: cultural, social, political, health, political, educational or economic, etc. (Macaulay et al., 1999).

This research study was conducted with a community that has common educational and cultural interests since all research participants are either instructors or students involved with *English 114*. While the community shares common educational and cultural interests, there is also a division between Aboriginal students and instructors, each having somewhat different interests. Therefore, within the context of this study, there is one large community with two sub-communities. Any reference to community in this document refers to the research partners, or participants who have contributed to this study.

Several sources provide recommendations for research conducted with Aboriginal communities. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* represents the policies of three major research granting institutions in Canada regarding ethical conduct in research with human participants. In reference to research with Aboriginal communities the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* suggests the following guidelines to researchers.

Tri-Council Policy Statement

- to respect the culture, traditions and knowledge of the aboriginal group
- to conceptualize and conduct research with the aboriginal group as a partnership
- to consult members of the group who have relevant expertise;
- to involve the group in the design of the project
- to examine how the research may be shaped to address the needs and concerns of the group
- to make best efforts to ensure that the emphasis of the research, and the ways chosen to conduct it, respect the many viewpoints of different segments of the group in question

to provide the group with information respecting the following:

- protection of the Aboriginal group's cultural estate and other property
- the availability of a preliminary report for comment
- the potential employment by researchers of members of the community appropriate and without prejudice
- researchers' willingness to cooperate with community institutions
- researchers' willingness to deposit data, working papers and related materials in an agreed upon repository
- to acknowledge in the publication of the research results the various viewpoints of the community on the topics researched
- to afford the community an opportunity to react and respond to the research findings before the completion of the final report, in the final report or even in all relevant publications. Aboriginal peoples may wish to react to research findings. It is inappropriate for researchers to dismiss matters of disagreement with the group without giving such matters due consideration. If disagreement persists, researchers should afford the group an opportunity to make its views known, or they should accurately report any disagreement about the interpretation of the data in their reports or publications.

(*Tri-Council Policy Statement*: Section 6.

Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples", 2001)

The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* was created specifically for research with Aboriginal communities, but the five principles described above could be applied to any research project. These guidelines remain fairly general because specific guidelines cannot possibly address the diversity of different Aboriginal communities or research projects.

Instead of proposing guidelines, Smith (1999) suggests that the following questions need to be answered by researchers in this type of cross-cultural context:

- Who defined the research problem?
- For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?
- What knowledge will the community gain from this study?
- What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?
- What are some likely positive outcomes for this study?
- What are some possible negative outcomes?
- How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?
- To whom is the researcher accountable?
- What processes are in place to support the research, the researched and the researcher?

Along with providing answers to these questions that Smith poses, the research design should follow the *Tri-Council* guidelines as closely as possible in this context. All of the *Tri-Council* guidelines are important for this type of research; however, a masters' thesis is somewhat restricted when compared with other research projects.

The following list summarizes key concepts taken from the guidelines that can be used for the purposes of this study:

- to conduct research with the client or participant as a partnership
- to approach all aspects of the research with respect for the research partner
- to consult members of the group that have relevant expertise
- to involve the research partner with as many aspects of research as possible
- to develop a research study where the outcome can benefit the client or participant

Exploring Research Methods

Research method is important because it is seen as the way knowledge is acquired (Smith, 1999). Knowledge can be a means for obtaining a position of power in society, and therefore acquiring knowledge can be considered a method of acquiring power (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). As stated earlier, understanding a cultural worldview is a necessary preliminary step in cross-cultural research. When deciding on research methods, three factors are crucial:

- respecting and understanding of worldview
- a concern with avoiding unfounded generalizations
- establishing a collaborative partnership with research partners

According to Mihesuah (1998), an interdisciplinary approach is an effective way to avoid generalization. An important method used to avoid generalizations is the inclusion of multiple perspectives from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics and professionals. For the purposes of this study, several different research models from various disciplines were explored.

Most sources recommend establishing a partnership with research participants in a cross-cultural context. In order to attempt to establish a partnership collaborative research models were selected. Collaboration is marked by partnership in decision making, sharing of ideas, and an integration of multiple perspectives (Poggenpohl, 2004). Three research models were studied that all have in common the desire to place the participants' needs and participation at the forefront of the research or design process.

Participatory Research

A method by which participants work in partnership with researchers is by collaborating with those affected by the issue being studied in a systematic inquiry. The goals

of participatory research involve education and effecting social change (Macaulay et al., 1999). It is a social practice that has an interest in democratic representation of people, especially those who are traditionally marginalized in societies (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). This research method seems particularly well suited to Visual Communication Design because this discipline can be an important resource for addressing social problems (Frascara et al., 1997). Communication strategies can have a significant positive impact on social problems (Frascara, 1997).

Participatory Design

Participatory design is an approach that was originated in Scandinavia in the 1970s, by academics and practitioners who were concerned about workers' rights and the impact of new technologies on those workers. It emphasizes user involvement in all stages of the process of development of technological and organizational systems. The goal of the research was to avoid automation of workers' tasks and to contribute to the development of systems that would enhance their ability to perform their jobs. Direct involvement of participants in the design process is critical to this approach (Warr & O'Neill, 2004).

User-centered Design

This model involves designers working in collaboration with experts in a particular subject area and with the client or audience for which the designed communication is being created. Similar to Participatory Research and Participatory Design models, the user is the central focus of the research and direct involvement from the user is critical.

Research Methods Used

Qualitative research methods were used because the main focus of the research study was to discover participants' perceptions and attitudes about the proposed learning resource. The goal of this study was to discover what processes might aid the creation of a visual design that is culturally appropriate for this cross-cultural resource. At this stage no task-related activities were being measured and therefore, quantitative methods were not required.

Interviews were a vital component in directing the development of the prototype. Initially, when developing the interview protocol, it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be conducted to learn from students and instructors what visual criteria and content were necessary for the prototype. In Participatory Research, dialogue occupies a central position in the pursuit of an equal partnership between researcher and participant (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). In an attempt to create a more equal partnership interviews were loosely structured to allow a more informal dialogue with participants that would hopefully encourage participants to help shape the direction of the discussion. The same questions were asked at each interview, but discussion at the end of the interviews was shaped by the participants.

A survey of web sites and computer applications that deal with similar materials and cultural content was also completed (see Appendix C for list of surveyed web

sites). Four web sites were selected from this survey for closer review. Evaluative criteria for the review were based on some standard assessment criteria, but some sections were altered or added to address the issue of culturally appropriate visual design.

Conversations with participants involved some discussion of aesthetics and a discussion of potential approaches for the visual design of the resource. In order to pursue an appropriate approach for the design, a visual exploration of images was also necessary. In order to avoid selection of particular design elements from digital resources by participants, book covers were selected for the image exploration. A variety of book covers were selected to give a broad range of visual characteristics on which the students could comment. As primary users of the proposed resource, students were consulted in order to explore some visual preferences and common understandings of culturally appropriate material. Students completed a set of questions, in writing, and an open-ended discussion with students followed. This session was developed in partnership with instructors.

According to Kenny (2000) researcher should try to develop an approach that is unique and reflects Aboriginal values and beliefs. Aboriginal pedagogy and research methods do not include a separation of disciplines into subjects like science, art, languages etc. (Kenny, 2000). One aspect of Aboriginal cultures previously mentioned is the understanding and importance of the interrelatedness of everything in the world. In order to try and develop a research approach that was similarly holistic, interviews were conducted with various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics and professionals from different disciplines, such as, Aboriginal Capacity and Developmental Research Environments, the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program, Anthropology, Art History, Visual Communication Design, Educational Policy Studies, English and Film Studies and the Transition Year Program.

Weber-Pillwax (2001) suggests that making the research process as broad as possible and forming as many relationships as possible can enrich the research. A holistic approach might require going beyond typical academic literature to study aspects of popular culture. When studying visual design that includes multiple media it is important to also study those media. Popular culture sources, such as Aboriginal television, web sites and radio shows were explored, and a graduate course on Aboriginal oral literatures was audited. Most of the students in the course were Aboriginal. Through conversations with students about the literature new perspectives were afforded that led to an enriched appreciation of Aboriginal cultures and also informed the process for this study. Using academic sources can be a valuable part of learning about another culture, but it is most important to also talk with individuals from that culture. Literature cannot provide the same spontaneity or unexpected results that conversations can. Often information gathered that is unexpected proves to be the most valuable.

Role of the Designer and Design

“Visual Communication Design is an activity that has an impact on the public sphere, and as such requires a professional responsibility that overflows the technical. A technically excellent but ethically and socially irresponsible designer is a social, cultural and ecological hazard.” — Frascara, 1997, p. 32

A designer can be of critical importance in the success or failure of a communication. When the communication involves the complex task of addressing many cultural groups the role of the designer becomes more critical. Although many institutions in North America are making efforts to improve relationships with Aboriginal groups one area that lags far behind other areas is visual representation of Aboriginal cultures in the mainstream media. If designers can have significant influence on the success of communications then they could make a significant contribution towards improving this situation.

Many representations present blatant visual stereotypes of Aboriginal cultures. Logos for professional sports organizations seem to be some of the most obvious and well known examples of the kinds of stereotypes that exist today. Logos for the *Atlanta Braves*, *Cleveland Indians* and *Chicago Blackhawks* are some of the most visible public examples (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Sports logos from the *Cleveland Indians*, *Chicago Blackhawks* and *Atlanta Braves*

Some more subtle issues arise from incorrect use of Aboriginal cultural symbols and artifacts. The popularity of Aboriginal imagery in the “New Age” spiritual movement is a form of cultural appropriation that furthers the misrepresentation of Aboriginal cultures (Hulan & Warley, 1999–2000).

Aboriginal imagery is prevalent in the mainstream media, but because of misrepresentation this presence has often fostered misunderstanding instead of understanding. This presence and simultaneous absence of Aboriginal cultures in Canada is what Hulan and Warley (1999–2000) call a “paradox of Aboriginal (in)visibility.” They suggest that it stems from general ignorance of the histories and cultures to which the images refer.

It is unacceptable and unethical for designers to use any culturally specific images without researching the context of their use. Aboriginal symbols should only be used as meaningful communication devices in the correct context of use, not as decorative elements. If designers intend to use Aboriginal symbols in their work they should consult directly with Aboriginal community members to obtain permission to

use such symbols. Along with correct use, designers should be aware that like oral literatures, some visuals are not meant to be shared with audiences outside of a particular community.

This misuse of imagery is probably more common among trained designers than the use of blatant stereotypes mentioned above, but some of the most dangerous stereotypes are the ones that are so subtle that they are difficult to recognize. This problem of stereotypes will be discussed further in the survey of visual materials, but it is important to note the designer's potential to contribute towards the perpetuation or elimination of stereotypes. Designers are trained and educated to interpret visual information and images, and with more informed practice they could assist in the elimination of stereotypes and misappropriation of images and symbols.

Similar to a researcher, a socially responsible designer, or design educator, should participate in the process of decolonization. Many are afraid to get involved in this process for fear of making mistakes. The "retreat position" that some attempt to take in order to remain neutral has a negative impact on Aboriginal peoples in Canada by contributing to their invisibility (Hulan & Warley, 1999–2000).

James Tully argues in *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity*, that political and cultural recognition depends on dialogue (Tully, 1995). It has already been established that in a cross-cultural design context establishing a partnership is essential to a successful working relationship. If this is true, then the role of the designer in this context should also include an understanding of how to foster successful dialogue in the research portion of the process. The role of the designer in a cross-cultural context might require a more intense phase of research in the design process.

Hulan and Warley (1999–2000) describe the role of teachers of Aboriginal literature as being involved in an act of cross-cultural translation where the task is "to make the "other" comprehensible without erasing its difference." A designer working on the translation of Aboriginal literatures into a multicultural resource has a similar task, especially when the resource must embody aspects of both Western and Aboriginal cultures visually.

Designers are seen as problem identifiers and problem solvers, but we should be careful to acknowledge that traditional design methods are not always sufficient for this purpose. In the case of a cross-cultural design context, designers must be willing to question traditional design conventions and practice in order to comprehend how other epistemologies might require them to modify or depart from traditional conventions.

One example of this break with convention focuses on design research. Frascara (1997) noted that in a user-centered design practice the designer must consult professionals and experts as well as the user in order to identify and solve problems. In a cross-cultural design context this process may become more complex. When a designer enters into unfamiliar territory it may often be difficult to evaluate expertise, or even recognize an "expert." A designer's role should therefore involve research into the genealogy of a viewpoint as well as research on the particular cultural group with whom they work. (Alcoff, 1991–1992)

Designers work in an interdisciplinary context, most often as part of a team (Frascara, 2004). This concern with understanding the genealogy of viewpoint should also be considered in the context of an interdisciplinary design team. Each team member must be prepared to examine and even question the perspective from which they approach the problem, and also be prepared to question the perspective of others on the team.

Unlike artists, designers do not normally create the message with which they work. A designer may strive to keep a personal presence from appearing in the communications they create; however, no communication can be completely neutral or free of a designer's presence. Blaeser (as cited in Armstrong, 1993) argues that an urgent task in Canadian Aboriginal literature is to create strategies that are based on Aboriginal worldviews. It might be argued that the role of the designer working with Aboriginal communities must also be to learn to create visual design strategies based on Aboriginal worldviews.

A designer's role is in a state of constant flux dependent on the design context. Probably one of the most important aspects of a designer's role is to be flexible to the design context, task and audience. In a cross-cultural context this flexibility should include the ability to appreciate, respect and understand unfamiliar epistemologies.

Aboriginal Literature and the Need for a Learning Resource

Aboriginal Literature in the University Curriculum

"... Indian writers today have come to expect, even demand, that readers learn something about the mythology and literary (oral) history of Native Americans."
—Owens, 1992, p. 29

In the university curriculum this literature is generally studied in one of two ways: as a specialized course that often reaches few students, or in the broader context of a Canadian literature course (Hulan & Warley, 1999–2000). If a Native literature course is taught as an independent course, there is the risk that it may reach fewer students (Hulan, 1998). However, if Native literature is taught as part of a Canadian Literature course it may not be given the attention needed to understand the complexities of the subject (Hulan, 1998).

Part of the problem with placing Aboriginal literature in the curriculum is the challenge to the established literary canons of literature organized by nation-state. (Hulan, 1998) Since the term "Aboriginal" refers to many cultures organization by the term Aboriginal might suggest one nation-state, and thus one culture, when really many cultures are represented. Aside from the problems of using established canons for grouping the literature under the term Aboriginal, there is also the problem of associating Aboriginal literatures with Canadian literatures. Some writers may not identify themselves as Canadian and Aboriginal literature courses do not cover only literature from Aboriginal Canadian sources, but will also include literatures from other countries (Hulan, 1998).

In the university setting, teachers of Aboriginal literature usually focus less on form and more on social context and anthropological information (Hulan, 1998). Content-oriented readings are important for cross-cultural understanding, but could potentially lead to a lack of appreciation of the literary merit of the works (Hulan, 1998). Regardless of the format in which Aboriginal literatures are taught, the literature unfortunately makes up a minute portion of the curriculum taught in Canadian universities (Hulan & Warley, 1999–2000).

Complexity of the Literature for Students

The literature can be difficult to fit into the curriculum in a manner that ensures it is taught with sufficient depth, but the content of the literature can also pose difficulties for students. The study of Aboriginal Canadian literature is difficult for undergraduate students because of the combination of complex elements such as: translation, the use of oral as well as written traditions, and the conventions of English literature (Hulan, 1998). With little exposure to works by Aboriginal writers students have limited experience with the complex nature of the literature.

When specific cultural references appear in the literature, and students do not have any familiarity with the culture, another layer of complexity is added. There is a need to understand this literature, and to do so some aspects of culture must be addressed. As stated above, in order to avoid undervaluing the text, a focus on content should not become the primary concern of a critical reading. Some Aboriginal communities do not wish to share certain sacred aspects of culture. (Mihesuah, 1998) Not all Aboriginal authors may respect this wish for privacy.

Oral literatures play a critical role in the study of Aboriginal literature, including contemporary written literatures. Often authors will use conventions of oral literature in their written literature. Some authors writing for printed media will use conventions of speech in the literature, and arrange the layout of text to express the spoken word. For example, what Keith Basso calls “code switching” is used in Thomas King’s story, *One Good Story, That One* (Murray & Rice, 1999). King is expressing the particular way of Native speaking by ignoring grammatical and narrative conventions of printed media (Murray & Rice, 1999):

“Alright. You know, I hear this story up north. Maybe Yellowknife, that one, somewhere. I hear it maybe a long time. Old story this one. One hundred years, maybe more. Maybe not so long either, this story.” — King, 1992, p. 62

Another example, provided by Hulan, notes Ruby Slipperjack’s use of the oral tradition in *Honour the Sun*. According to Hulan, the lack of narrative structure, sparse commentary and oblique references creates a silence in the novel akin to oral literature (Hulan, 1998). If oral literature plays such a critical role in contemporary Aboriginal literature, a course that focuses on this literature needs to address Aboriginal oral traditions.

Complexity of the Literature for Instructors

Almost every source on teaching Aboriginal Canadian Literature recommends that a learning resource must include perspectives of Aboriginal literary critics. If non-Native perspectives are included, they should be identified as such (Mihesuah, 1998). However, as Mihesuah (1998) notes in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing About American Indians*, even Native sources provide incorrect information. Here again the genealogy of viewpoint becomes important in order to evaluate sources. It seemed that the proposed resource should provide numerous perspectives to students, but it should be transparent to students and instructors where these perspectives originate (Hulan 1998). Understanding origin will provide an important aspect of the resource content, but it will also comprise an important aspect of the imagery used.

Many sources suggest that Aboriginal epistemologies should be incorporated into the teaching of the literature if possible. Traditional experience reflects the belief that knowledge is a process of experiencing the whole environment (Hulan, 1998). If knowledge is a process of experiencing the whole environment and if oral literatures are an important component of Aboriginal literature, to experience this literature then instructors should incorporate these other mediums of expression.

Classifying Aboriginal Literatures

As stated earlier in this report, Aboriginal pedagogy and research methods do not include a separation of disciplines into subjects like science, art, languages etc. (Kenny, 2000). Without a separation of disciplines, and if the relationships between all things are an important part of the Aboriginal worldview, then one approach to teaching Aboriginal literature might be to include materials from other disciplines. (fine arts, dance, theatre etc.). The course for which the proposed resource was designed incorporates works from the fine arts and other disciplines.

It is tempting to use definitions of Aboriginal Canadian literature as the sole basis for the organization of the learning resource, and there are many commonalities that can be found within the literature. Thomas King (1992) mentions the theme of interrelatedness as one example of such commonalities. Grouping the literature by culture, could lead to generalizations that authors might not appreciate. It could also create links between authors only by culture, not by the myriad topics they write about. Some Aboriginal authors do not wish their material to be associated with Aboriginal issues (Eigenbrod & Episkenew, 2002). However, from an alternate perspective, some feel a strong commitment to their communities, seeing themselves not as writers, but as activists for their communities. Grouping authors according to culture can increase the visibility and solidarity of the literature and of the culture (Eigenbrod & Episkenew, 2002).

While creating a specialized course in Aboriginal Canadian Literature can allow for additional time to study the elements of translation and oral and written traditions, there is often not enough time to cover all the complex issues mentioned above. If Aboriginal Canadian Literature is to be appreciated fully, within its cultural context, extra resources for students may be required.

Digital Media and Aboriginal Literature

Video and audio communications can contain many subtleties of communication that text cannot express (Barker, Yazdani, & NetLibrary Inc., 2000). Some examples are: body language, gestures and tone of voice. Oral literatures in the form of storytelling often rely on these subtleties for communication. While video and audio cannot replace the spontaneity and interaction present in oral traditions, they could provide additional cues that text cannot.

Murray and Rice (1999) suggest that this use of media fosters an understanding of connections within the literature:

“Aboriginal poets are writing not to freeze, but to reanimate oral traditions. And alternative media, including video and hypertext technology, offer immense possibilities for stories to move back and forth between young and old, rural and urban, Native and non-Native.”—Murray & Rice, 1999, p. xiv

Another important advantage of using digital media is the cognitive benefits that may result for students. The development of skills necessary to appreciate the complexities of the subject could be another. The use of such media by students in synchronous communications can help to develop metacognitive skills like self-reflection and revision (Jonassen, 1996). According to Jonassen (1996) computer-mediated communication is also a naturally collaborative technology. Collaboration is another key feature that will help students in the appreciation of differing perspectives. Collaboration with other students will present new interpretations of the literature and perhaps also encourage the appreciation of different points of view. As noted earlier, there will be many different perspectives presented in the learning resource that come from different sources. Assigned questions about the literature, provided by the instructor, might be helpful in motivating students to use the resource. If there is no requirement to use the resource to complete assignments, motivation to use the resource could be low (Jonassen, 1996).

About *English 114: Aboriginal Literature and Culture*

English 114: Aboriginal Literature and Culture was a new course offered at the University of Alberta in the 2004–2005 academic year. The development of this course came from a curricular review which suggested that a first year Aboriginal literature course should be provided to students in order to let them specialize in their first year. Previously Aboriginal literature was taught as part of an introductory one hundred level course.

Course Description for the 2004 academic year:

"This course will focus on readings in Aboriginal literature, culture and history. It will provide an opportunity to study Aboriginal knowledge, values, and identities as expressed in oral and literary traditions, and in the interrelations between them. Among the concepts and issues the course may address are performance, autobiography, literary history, comparative indigenities, and the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

A minimum of 30% of class time will be devoted to writing instruction. This can take many forms, including graded written assignments, informal writing exercises, writing workshops, free-writing exercises, stylistic analysis, research skills, peer editing, and ungraded writing. Students will be required to write at least four essays which will be marked and formally graded. Throughout the course students will write at least 6000 words." — R. Appleford
(Course Outline, English 114, 2004)

Course Content

All of the readings are organized by themes established by the instructors. The themes by which texts are organized are as follows: the politics of language, the tools of language, community/relationality, orality/performance, growing up and identities. Between these themes there is often an overlap of readings. For example, the same novel may appear under the theme orality and identity.

Several Aboriginal cultures are studied, as well as other disciplines:

- readings from Aboriginal authors primarily from North America, including oral and written literary traditions (prose, poetry etc.)
- some exploration of Fine art, dance, theatre, literature and creative writing

Sample readings from one of three course sections (2004):

- *Nothing But The Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature*. Ed. Purdy and Ruppert (Prentice-Hall, 2001)
 - *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson (Vintage Canada, 2001)
 - *The Rez Sisters*, Tomson Highway (Fifth House, 1988)
 - *Truth and Bright Water*, Thomas King (Perennial Canada, 1999)
 - *The Broadview Pocket Guide to Writing*, Babington and LePan (Broadview, 2002)
- A course pack of various readings was also required reading.*

Structure

- three sections of approximately 20 students
- each section taught by one instructor, one of the three instructors acts as a lead instructor for all sections

- one instructional assistant provides tutorial assistance for all three sections once a week, sessions are intended principally to improve writing skills
- each week all three sections meet for a “super section break out” session, all three instructors attend

Assignments

- essay assignments, creative writing assignments and exams were completed

Visual Design of the Resource

The proposed resource should represent Western literary conventions visually, and should also represent visually the presence of multiple Aboriginal cultures in the course readings. Multicultural or cross-cultural design is not new, but the discourse is relatively new (Katz, 1994). According to Katz (1994), design has always been a cross-cultural endeavour with designer and design artifact each representing a kind of culture. This interpretation could suggest that every design context is a cross-cultural design context.

A review of design sources on cross-cultural design seems to suggest that in the mid to late 1990s there was a rise in interest in cross-cultural design, most likely as a response to the awareness of the new “global marketplace.” Although there are no set methods or conventions established through this new discourse on cross-cultural design, several design professionals have suggested some approaches that may suit certain situations. Whatever the approach, the discourse that resulted in this interest in cross-cultural design has forced designers to become more aware of commonalities and differences between themselves, their work and their audience. The fusion of cultures that occurs in a cross-cultural setting is a delicate balance (Katz, 1994).

The meaning of a design can be affected by many important elements; one of the most complex for a designer to understand is the different interpretations that individuals bring to a design (Lipton, 2002). If meaning changes according to different interactions with the design, then designers must recognize and account for the fact that the design context is constantly changing.

Shifts in meaning can occur between two individuals, but also between cultures. The Modernist movement attempted to neutralize this effect making technology an objective aesthetic (Katz, 1994). This rigid approach does not account for peoples’ differences, including cultural differences. According to Swann (2002), Postmodern philosophy challenges these assumptions by proposing that “there are a multitude of ways to construct personal knowledge, and a pluralistic approach that recognizes these dimensions is now preferred to the former positivist paradigm that sought to prescribe a universal truth.” (p. 50) Currently, in sharp contrast to the modernist movement, in the discipline of design, there is a concern with how to tailor communications specifically to suit audience needs. McCoy (1995) calls this “narrowcasting” instead of “broadcasting.” With this concern comes the understanding that designers cannot make assumptions about cultural groups, even their own (Steiner & Haas, 1996).

Visual communications often thrive on appropriation of cultural icons and ideas (Steiner & Haas, 1994). When there is a concern with cultural appropriation, as is the case with Aboriginal cultures, this can be a serious problem. As stated earlier few designers recommend specific methodologies for cross-cultural design contexts. However, most recognize that design in a cross-cultural context must balance the universals that can be understood by multiple cultures with specific visual elements that are tailored towards those cultures.

Refining Visual Language

Of the sources consulted regarding processes used for the visual design of cross-cultural resources, Henry Steiner was one of the few that recommended some specific stages and techniques of cross-cultural design. Steiner has been working for many years as a designer in Hong Kong, and his interests involve understanding how to visually fuse elements of Eastern and Western culture in his design work. Steiner notes three stages in the development of cross-cultural design strategies (Steiner & Haas, 1994):

- Quotation — the designer uses foreign images without changing them, a form very close to plagiarism
- Mimicry — the designer mimics an artist's style, or the style of a certain school
- Transformation — the designer uses different cultural elements together to create new meaning. At this stage the once "foreign" becomes natural and instinctive

According to Steiner, transformation seems to be the ideal stage for a designer to reach. One might question however, how natural and instinctive communicating to any culture, even one's own, can ever become if every individual brings a different interpretation to the design.

Steiner also recommends three approaches for integrating different cultures visually (Steiner & Haas, 1994)*:

- Use of Symbolism — uses a higher abstraction than iconography and objects are transformed by being placed in an unexpected context
- Split imagery — a dialectical technique where cultures are put together in obvious contrast
- Ideography — several layers of meaning are included in one apparently simple image. The interest in these images come from the unexpected combinations of two cultures

Although these stages pose interesting questions in the context of cross-cultural design, one inherent problem with them, in relation to this study, is that they seem to concentrate on cross-cultural design where only two cultures need to be represented visually. Steiner's use of symbolism over iconography is useful for this particular context. When designing for multiple cultures, the use of iconography from some specific cultures would inevitably end up excluding others.

The concept of split imagery seems not to fit this particular context since it seems to support a more dialectic Western worldview. Although the resource must represent some Western literary conventions visually, it must above all represent Aboriginal authors. The idea of contrasting images by dividing them visually might also suggest to some a dialectic relationship based on contrast or even conflict. The danger of this visual approach, which suggests to viewers that two cultures are being compared, makes it unfeasible for this resource.

Along with the risk of being too specific, comes the risk of being so general that no one in the audience can identify with the design. For example, when an advertising agency selects a model that they believe may have a “pan-Hispanic” look there is the potential danger that the audience will not be able to relate to the image of the model in any meaningful way (Lipton, 2002). The same might be true of trying to establish “pan-Aboriginal” icons for the proposed resource based on some commonalities between cultures. Without being a member of the culture for which you are designing, any reinvention of icons or symbols is presumptuous.

Another danger inherent in the cross-cultural design context is the potential to unknowingly use visual stereotypes. This is compounded by the possibility that individual members of cultural groups may not even agree on visual stereotypes. The stereotypes present in the mainstream media demonstrate a lack of visual sensitivity to Aboriginal cultures. It is possible that a new visual language, a contemporary visual language, needs to be developed to reach this fast growing diverse population in an appropriate way. Perhaps a non-Aboriginal designer may not always be the ideal person to develop this language, but certainly designers will work with Aboriginal cultures and therefore should try to explore methods for culturally appropriate visual design.

The task defined by this study, tailoring communications for Aboriginal cultures, would be similar to defining visual characteristics that might address European cultures. Cultural characteristics can be defined as core cultural values that most individuals in a society share (Harel, 1999). One of the keys in designing for multiple cultures is to decide upon some commonalities that those cultures share, while at the same time avoiding the use of generalizations or stereotypes.

Defining Common Features

It is important here to reiterate the dangers of generalization when referring to a culture or cultures. In the complex field of communication, a delicate balance should be established in which a designer aims to create some forms of communication which act on a universal level, while still managing to include forms of communication that are subtle enough to communicate to a specific audience. As stated earlier, the use of icons or symbols may be too specific for multiple cultures; therefore, the resource might require a more abstract form of cultural representation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to fulfill all of the many requirements of the subject matter, design and content criteria for the prototype development should be based on detailed research questions.

Several key directing principles arose from the literature review that influenced the development of the resource:

- Throughout all phases of the research and design process collaborative strategies should be employed in an attempt to form a partnership with research participants
- Research participants should be consulted in order to learn how to make the visual design of the resource culturally appropriate
- The visual design of the resource should represent multiple Aboriginal cultures as well as Western literary conventions
- The visual design of the resource should incorporate some shared attributes that exist between Aboriginal cultures in order to address the audience
- Specific symbols and iconography may not be appropriate for the resource because they may exclude some cultural groups
- Various media should be included because they could be beneficial to students who wish to understand multiple perspectives of the literature and who wish to understand more about the cultural context of the literature studied

To refine the research questions, diagrams of the design process and objectives for the study were created. Objectives mapped in the diagrams were matched with questions for research participants to ensure that the interviews and dialogues with participants would address the design objectives. The objectives created for the design came from the literature review, and interviews with instructors and students. Final research questions were taken from the research question diagram.

Central Research Question

In a cross-cultural design context, how can a digital learning resource be designed in a culturally appropriate way to enrich undergraduate Aboriginal students' appreciation of Aboriginal literature and culture?

Two categories for organizing the sub-questions that arose from this broad question were also created: resource requirements and visual design.

Sub-questions: Resource Content Requirements

- Which media and formats are appropriate to communicate the complexities of the literature?
- Which materials do students and instructors think are critical for the visual design of the resource?
- How should the resource be designed so that it includes multiple perspectives of the literature?

Sub-questions: Resource Visual Design Requirements

- What do students and instructors think are culturally appropriate ways to design the resource?
- How can specific research and design processes and procedures aid in the creation of a culturally appropriate resource?
- How does design research inform the visual design of the resource?
- Which kinds of visual attributes appeal to students for the visual design of the resource?

The empirical research completed included: a series of interviews, a visual survey of existing materials, two in-class visits for observation purposes and an image exploration session with students to help establish visual preferences for the prototype. It is important to bear in mind, that the process of developing this prototype was not a linear one. For example, the literature review informed the interview questions as did the preliminary interviews with various professionals.

Participants

This study was approved by the Arts, Science and Law Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. The instructors were contacted by email and in person to request interviews. Each instructor was given an information letter about the study and asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview (Appendix B). With permission from all instructors, an announcement was made to students during class time to explain the study. An information letter was handed out to each student in attendance. Prior to being interviewed students were given a second copy of the information letter and asked to individually sign a consent form (Appendix B).

Interviews

Several professionals in different disciplines were interviewed to help shape the research study. Specific information for the development of the prototype was collected from instructors and students. All the questions for student interviews were reviewed and approved by the lead instructor for *English 114*. Three instructors, a teaching assistant and four students were then interviewed to assist in the process of prototype development. Audio recordings were made of all formal interviews. Students and instructors were interviewed separately for two reasons. First, different questions were needed for instructors and students. Second, students might not have felt comfortable discussing their experiences in the course with instructors present. Students were informed, in the research letters and consent forms, that their identities would be kept confidential, but that their words might be quoted anonymously in the thesis document. The lead instructor for the course was consulted throughout the study, and played a vital role in the selection of *English 114* as the context for which the prototype was derived.

The interview process for this project was the most informative aspect of all the research conducted. Most important was the information necessary for the creation of the prototype; however, informal interviews also helped shape other areas of the study:

- interviews with instructors aided in the development of a recommended reading list for the literature review
- interview questions were developed for students and instructors
- testing methods were developed for the image exploration session

The summary that follows, reports on instructors' and students' opinions about what was pertinent information for the development of the prototype. In an attempt to engage in less structured dialogue with participants the order of questions varied for each interview and some questions were skipped or modified. The questions were created as guidelines; an attempt to adhere strictly to the interview questions would have made a conversational style of communication with participants more difficult because it would have created too formal an atmosphere. A set of questions was created to use as a guideline in each interview.

It is important to note that comments were summarized and paraphrased as accurately as possible, but the researcher's perspective has undoubtedly had an impact on the organization and presentation of information. The nature of the information gathered and the types of questions used, were influenced by what the interviewer thought was important information. These interview sessions should be viewed in part as a collaborative effort between the researcher and the research participants. Any additional information that was discussed, in conversation with research participants, has also been included.

Instructor Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three instructors and an instructional assistant. A set of questions was created for the interviews, but some unstructured dialogue was also included with each interview. The key points that the questions were designed to cover were as follows:

1. Course Content and Objectives
2. Instructor Experience of the Course
3. Student Experience of the Course
4. Current Use of Supplementary Resources
5. Suggested Resource Features
6. Potential Impact of the Resource
7. Appearance of the Prototype

Course Content and Objectives

The three instructors and the instructional assistant all thought that it was essential that students develop critical reading, thinking and writing skills. All of the instructors thought that an exploration of identity, worldview, post-colonial issues of colonization and an understanding of the diversity among Aboriginal cultures were critical issues in the course. In order to explain diversity, some instructors have emphasized to students that everyone brings cultural assumptions to the reading of a work, whether those are Western or Aboriginal assumptions. According to instructors the issue of identity is particularly important in the study of Aboriginal literature. As described by the instructors, identity involved an understanding not only of the innate complexities of identity, but also of how the students' backgrounds relate to the material studied and how the authors' backgrounds relate to their writing.

Oral literature plays an important role in the course curriculum; however, several instructors have found barriers and difficulties in approaching the teaching of oral literatures. Some instructors have done readings in class, while others study contemporary writers whose works have been transcribed. Instructors also wish to reveal to students how oral traditions have shaped written traditions. Interviews wherein authors explain their work have also been used by instructors. The study of oral literatures has presented issues that revolve around content and technical limitations. Many oral works are not translated and some sources are difficult to find. Broaching the topic of traditional oral and written literatures has also been difficult, because some of the work is not appropriate to discuss in class. For example, Aboriginal cultures often do not wish to share certain sacred aspects of culture (Miheisuh, 1998).

Instructor Experience of the Course

Instructors had between one and seven years of experience teaching Aboriginal literature. It appeared, from the results of the interviews, that all instructors, (regardless of years teaching the course or similar courses) thought that supplementary resources such as images, audio and video were vital materials for the course.

Instructors identified several challenges and rewards related to teaching the course. As with any first year course, instructors have had problems with students' participation and attendance. Instructors faced additional challenges because *English 114* was a new course in 2004. According to the lead instructor, it has proven difficult to develop strategies for helping students with critical skills, and for getting students to do independent writing. The course content is also challenging for instructors because of the complexity of combining Western concepts of genre with Aboriginal constructs of oral and written literature. Authors studied in the course each confront these notions in a different manner, which further complicates the process of teaching the course content. In addition, with their different learning styles, students needed materials to be explained in different ways and some instructors found this to be challenging.

Although instructors have encountered some challenges, they also identified several rewarding aspects of teaching the course. Most instructors mentioned that observing students making strides in their critical and analytical skills through their experience in the course was rewarding. When students gave informed comments on the literature studied it enriched the experience of both instructors and students. For example, when a student was from the same cultural background as an author they were often able to provide more information about the culture to students and instructors and aided in interpreting the text. Instructors also found it rewarding when they saw students encounter and grasp new ideas that challenged them.

Student Experience of the Course

All three instructors mentioned that issues of identity, raised in the literature studied, were engaging for the students in the course. According to one instructor, students were curious to know more about the authors and their backgrounds. The humour used by some authors and the heterogeneous voices expressed in all the literatures were also identified as aspects of the curriculum that engaged students with the readings. One of the biggest challenges for the students, identified by all three instructors, was the struggle to refine their critical writing skills.

Current Use of Supplementary Resources

Each instructor incorporated some other forms of media as support materials for the readings. A range of materials, images, audio and video files have been used to explore identity issues, to aid in close readings of texts, to demonstrate connections to landscape and to show connections between similar themes explored in different disciplines. Instructors all thought that images were a critical part of supplementary resources. Some thought that showing images of authors allows students to identify with the authors and to see them as “real” people which adds a dimension of reality to the printed word. It was also suggested that showing works of fine art can demonstrate how similar issues, to those studied in print, are approached by another discipline. One instructor mentioned using images as a stimulus for students to complete free writing assignments in response to an idea or issue raised in the course.

Suggested Resource Features

Several features for the resource were suggested by instructors:

- research assignments and creative writing assignments
- biographies of authors
- a focus on images because class time focuses on the texts
- references from the Modern Language Association writing guide
- links to authors’ web sites
- make the resource available to students in class and at home
- include biographical information and information on authors’ cultural backgrounds
- show juxtapositions of different media like images and audio
- list external web site links related to course materials
- include historical information, both pre and post-contact
- include video clips, audio files and images

Potential Impact of the Resource

Instructors identified the following as potential effects of the resource on the course:

- the resource could help students refine independent research skills
- if a forum were included, it might encourage communication between students and between instructors and students
- use of the resource could help students refine their research skills
- it would be easier for instructors to show media in class using the resource
- giving students the opportunity to access materials outside of class could help them stay up to date if they miss classes

- providing background materials to students who are unfamiliar with the material could benefit students who are hesitant to ask questions
- it might provide a more “low stakes” context for students to explore concepts raised in class
- it could make students more autonomous by allowing them to seek out information on their own and by allowing them to explore issues that they might be too embarrassed to raise in class
- the resource could increase continuity between course sections and allow instructors to work together more collaboratively by sharing resources
- it could allow instructors to check in more often on students’ progress
- inclusion of a forum might not be useful if it is voluntary since students seem reluctant to write
- students who are shy might be more willing to express opinions in a forum because they might think it is less intimidating
- the use of multimedia could allow students to understand the “webbed” nature of the texts by allowing them to see intersections of a number of issues

Appearance of the Prototype

According to instructors, the structure and organization of the prototype ideally should use the themes through which the literature is studied in class. The texts are organized by the following themes: the politics of language, the tools of language, community/relationality, orality/performance, growing up and identities. Another important suggestion for the development of the prototype was that it should be organized in an associative way to support a holistic approach to the material. An associative organization of the literature would be an organization by ideas (or themes), and would encourage students to examine aspects of the themes of the literature and make connections between readings by theme.

The instructors were asked to discuss some visual examples, that they thought were culturally appropriate, in order to clarify their recommendations for the visual appearance of the resource. Some examples that were discussed included: the *Syncrude* exhibit at the Royal Alberta Museum, *Kegedonce Press* (a book publisher) and the web site for *Spirit Magazine*. *Kegedonce* books were discussed in the image exploration session and the *Spirit Magazine* web site was reviewed in the web survey. A survey of the *Syncrude* exhibit provided some valuable information as to how to organize the prototype in an associative way.

The *Syncrude* exhibit at the Royal Alberta Museum is “one of the largest explorations of First People’s history on the continent, with stories spanning 11 000 years and 500 generations.” (Royal Alberta Museum, 2005, ¶1) Work on the gallery began in 1993 and was completed in cooperation with an Aboriginal Advisory Committee. Social issues are dealt with openly, regardless of negative portrayals of Canadian government and information is organized in an associative way by topic,

chronology and cultural group (Figures 2–4). There seems to be a concern that information about Aboriginal people should be presented by Aboriginal people. The aesthetic of the museum exhibit mixes both the historical and contemporary. Earth tones make up the dominant colour scheme and a mix of photography and illustration is used throughout exhibit.

When discussing the visual appearance of the prototype, several different suggestions were made by participants regarding the tone of the resource. Because many students are in their twenties, it was suggested by one instructor that the prototype should use their visual language. Some instructors thought the tone should not be too serious, because it might end up looking too much like an historical museum piece. Others thought that the appearance should support the resource's credibility and that it could be visually associated with the University of Alberta. However, there was a concern that the resource not look exactly like the University of Alberta web site, or a webCT application because they thought that these sites were too "bland." There was also a concern that the resource utilize any images that could be interpreted as stereotypes:

"...the fact that there's a million different medicine wheels if you look on the internet, it's almost like a cliché or something, even though it has real cultural worth."
—Instructor English 114

Part of the difficulty in creating a resource to represent multiple Aboriginal cultures is that it not make false generalizations or exclude cultures. Some participants thought that using the four colours or the four directions, (both very important in Aboriginal culture) might be one way to avoid excluding certain groups. It was also suggested that the prototype be comprised of a range of contemporary and historical images. When asked how the prototype should represent Aboriginal cultures, it was suggested by one instructor that, because the University of Alberta is in Cree territory, that there might need to be some visual recognition of Cree culture. However, all three instructors and the instructional assistant noted the importance of landscape in the literature and thought that landscapes play a critical role in the literatures.

Student Interviews

Student interviews were intended to be conducted individually when the study was designed; however, after arranging to meet with one student individually the interview evolved into a group interview with three students. The student who arranged to be interviewed decided to bring two friends from the course who also wished to contribute to the study. In addition to the group interview, one other student was interviewed on a separate occasion.

It is important to note that, although the interviews were intended to be individual, the three person interview arose spontaneously. The assumption was that it would be better to make sure each student was able to offer an opinion that was not influenced by other students. It was also assumed that if a shy student were interviewed as part of a group that individual might not get an opportunity to speak.

Syncrude Exhibit, Royal Alberta Museum

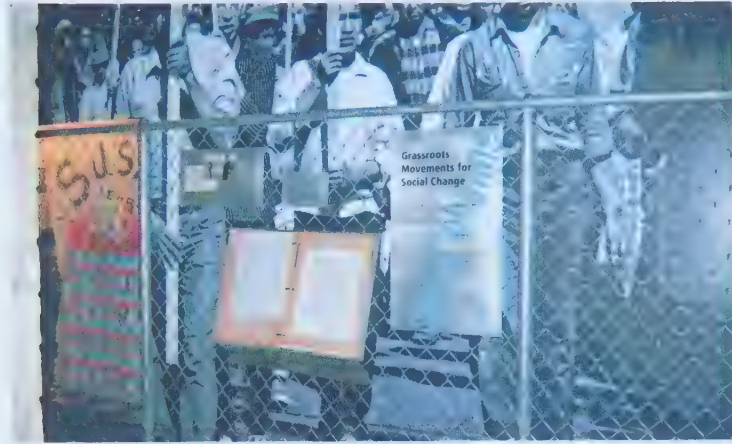


Figure 2 Contemporary issues represented



Figure 3 Aboriginal perspectives provided by Aboriginal individuals

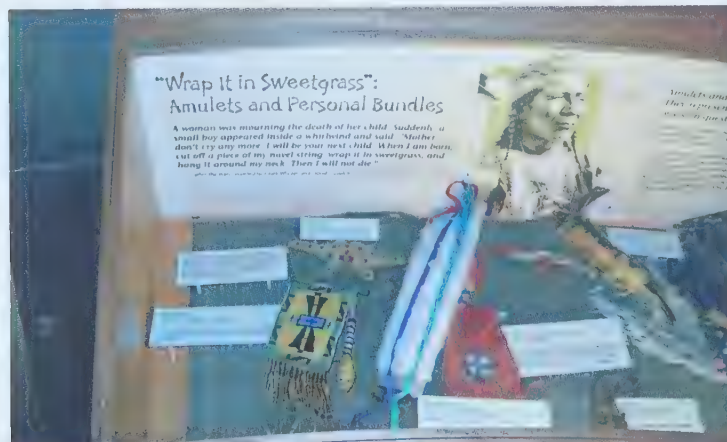


Figure 4 An associative organization of items in the exhibit

But without other students to participate in the interview a shy student might never volunteer for an interview and a valuable perspective could then be lost. It appeared that these particular students were more comfortable with a group interview situation and that this should be respected. When attempting to develop a collaborative research study it is important to let the research participants help shape the study (*Tri-Council Policy Statement: Section 6. Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples*, 2001).

Student interview questions were designed to cover materials similar to those used in the instructor interviews, but some additional demographic information was also collected (Appendix B). Questions covered the following topics/areas:

- demographic Information
- student Experience of the course
- suggested Resource Features
- appearance of the Prototype

For the student interviews, questions focused more on the visual design and resource requirements because the resource should appeal to students, and it must include content that both instructors and students think is useful. At the end of the session students informally discussed the book covers that did not appeal to them. This casual conversation provided some valuable information about the visual design of the resource.

Demographic Information

The students interviewed ranged in age from 19 to 28. None of the students ranked their computer skills as “expert;” the answers from students ranged from “beginner” to “intermediate.” Most stated that their primary use of the computer was for word processing and email. All four participants used a high speed connection to access internet, one used only university computers to access the internet, the rest accessed the internet primarily from home; however, they did mention that they thought most TYP students used the school computers.

Student Experience of the Course

Many of the students expressed opinions about the current use of media in the course:

“I think there wasn’t enough visual stuff, personally. I would like to see the places described in the story.”—Student, English 114

*“We did have some overheads, but we couldn’t make out the overheads.”
—Student, English 114*

“...when the author reads it you are like, wow, is that ever powerful, I’ve got tingles. You can hear their emotion and what they are trying to portray with the literature.”—Student, English 114

All of the students also reported that they thought they connected their own cultural background with the material in the course, and that it motivated them to read more. Some mentioned that they had gone on to read more literature than was required for the course. All four students mentioned that they regretted not visiting the instructors more during designated office hours. Even students that appeared quite confident in the interview expressed shyness about asking questions:

“I found I wasn’t comfortable, until the end, talking to the professor because for me, the work I was doing was so personal I was afraid of criticism – to think I didn’t know what I was doing. I was kind of shy.”—student, English 114

The students interviewed all thought that the resource could be beneficial especially for shy students, if they were motivated to participate. They commented that if the motivation wasn’t there, the students wouldn’t use the resource. Most students thought that there should be a unified look for the resource, that might change according to the themes used in class. They thought it would be too confusing visually to change the “look” of the resource for each author. However, one student thought that it might be insulting to keep the appearance of the resource the same for each author.

Most students seemed personally motivated to participate in the course and reported positive experiences. From comments made in the interviews it appeared that the students thought that they would use the proposed resource because they were sufficiently curious about the work they studied in class.

Suggested Resource Features

When asked about completing assignments using the resource most students said that they would not be motivated to complete them using the resource. They thought it would add extra work, stating that they would prefer it if use of the resource were optional. This differs from what instructors stated, and from the results of the literature review. The content of the resource, and its various uses, would have to be decided by instructors if a functional resource were to be created in future, but for the design of the initial prototype, this information was not critical. Most students thought that a forum would be useful for communication with instructors and other students, but did not want to be forced to use it to complete assignments. It is also important to note that three of the four students were concerned that there should be tutorials offered on how to use the proposed resource. They thought that if students were not given instructions about how to use the resource, that they would seldom use it.

The following summarizes the features suggested by students:

- ability to hand in assignments online for convenience, and to contact instructors through resource
- resource should provide more information on authors
- include images and video clips
- examples of essays for reference

- general essay writing references (Students reported that requirements for essays varied with instructors, and thought that specific requirements might therefore be confusing)
- ability to take notes and save them using the resource
- include Aboriginal languages when relevant, with definitions
- links for *Modern Language Association* and *American Psychological Association* writing guides
- blog or forum for communication and sharing of images and text
- images of landscape, maps, pictures of authors
- other relevant cultural information, or links for information like music, art, information about Aboriginal communities
- design of the resource should make it easy to find information

"Video would be awesome – tone and facial expression are really important."

— Student, *English 114*

Appearance of the Prototype

Several comments were made regarding the design of the information contained in the resource. It appeared from repeated comments, that there was a concern with making the resource "clean looking" and simple to use and that the menus should show all available options and be placed consistently. Some students suggested that the organization should be based on the themes studied in the course and that the visual appearance might also be based on those themes.

A wide range of colours were suggested for the prototype, most often earth tones. It was also suggested that any images included should be colourful and that landscapes and environmental images should be included with stories. All four students thought that images should not be placed beside the text, but should be shown in a separate window when the user clicks on a hypertext link. They all thought that this would allow users to read the text without interruption.

When asked about visual stereotypes, students thought that historical images should be included if the works studied were historical. They thought that because an image was historical, it did not mean that it was stereotypical.

Nonetheless, they thought that the use of images should not support stereotypes:

"...you just can't have a dreamcatcher a wagon and a chief on every page, there is a lot more to Aboriginal culture." —Student, *English 114*

They all suggested that images should represent all aspects of Aboriginal cultures:

"I think it is important to tie modern culture with traditional culture."
—Student, *English 114*

Analysis of Interviews

According to instructors and students, the majority of suggested resource features were essentially similar. The only major difference between instructors and students was in whether the resource should be used to complete assignments. At the early stages in the research for the resource, details of the requirements are not yet critical, but instructors and students were asked about requirements in order to make it possible to understand the amount of information and the kind of information that might be used in the resource. If a functional prototype were to be developed for the resource, the requirements would also dictate some aspects of the platform on which it is delivered. Students were also asked questions about basic computer skills and internet connections in order to establish the format, navigation and functionality that would be suitable for the resource.

The following is a summary of the suggested resource features as decided by instructors and students:

- research assignments and creative writing assignments
- include biographical information and information on authors' cultural backgrounds
- links to authors' web sites
- list external web site links related to course materials
- include historical information, both pre and post-contact
- examples of essays for reference
- *Modern Language Association* and *American Psychological Association* guides
- general essay writing references
- juxtapose varied media like images and audio
- a focus on images because class time focuses on the texts
- when relevant add Aboriginal languages with definitions of words
- include images of landscape, maps, pictures of authors, audio and video clips
- incorporate a blog or forum for communication and sharing of images
- ability to hand in assignments online for convenience and contact instructors through resource
- ability to take notes and save them using the resource
- make the resource available to students in class and at home
- other relevant cultural information, or links for information like music, art, information about Aboriginal communities

- design of the resource should make it easy to find information
- associative organization of content by theme to encourage a holistic approach to the material

These recommendations, for the visual design of the resource, were helpful in developing some preliminary guidelines, but further information about content and functionality would be required in order to begin designing a functional prototype.

Often when asked about the visual design of the prototype participants supplied answers that related to content. With participants who may have little experience discussing visual design, it would be unrealistic to expect them to verbalize their opinions about visual characteristics with ease. This did make it necessary to find some other method for exploring students' aesthetic preferences.

In order to help establish the visual design of the resource the requirements for the visual design that resulted from the literature review were revisited:

- the visual design of the resource should represent multiple Aboriginal cultures as well as Western literary conventions
- the visual design of the resource should incorporate some common aspects that exist, between Aboriginal cultures, in order to address the broader audience
- specific symbols and iconography may not be appropriate for the resource because they may exclude some cultural groups
- various media should be included because it might be beneficial to students multiple perspectives of the literature and who wish to understand more about the cultural context of the literature studied

Both students and instructors agreed that the resource should represent the cultures of Aboriginal authors, but did not mention using any visual conventions of Western literature. The layout of the text in the majority of course readings uses these conventions so it seems reasonable to maintain that these conventions are a necessary visual requirement for the resource. If the majority of the texts did not use conventional Western text layout, then other avenues might be explored for the visual design. Even though it was suggested that the resource should rely on images, most originate in the text, so some text must be presented in order to show the origin of many of the images.

The results of discussions with both instructors and students seemed to suggest that using specific symbols was seen as stereotypical or cliché. Several common features were mentioned by instructors and students: the four colours, the four directions and landscapes. Landscape and its importance in the literature was the only feature that was mentioned by all students and instructors. All students and instructors also mentioned that various media were important to show the different dimensions of the written and oral literatures. Most participants mentioned the importance

of including both historical and contemporary images. Some also mentioned that collage might be a useful technique for juxtaposing historical and contemporary images. From material gathered in the interviews, there seemed to be a general consensus that the proposed prototype would be useful for both students and instructors, but more detailed information was required in order to develop the visual design of the resource. To get a more informed notion of students' aesthetic preferences, an image exploration session was planned for the students.

Web Site Evaluations

Web site evaluations can serve many functions. Some of the most common purposes of web site evaluations are to assess competing web sites, to evaluate web sites in a similar genre, or to analyze a web site that is going to be re-designed. The purpose of the web site evaluations conducted for this study was to analyze existing digital media that deal with Aboriginal cultural material in order to explore potential strategies for the visual design of the resource.

A broad survey of web sites, that continued throughout the course of the research study, was conducted. Where possible, the designers of the web sites were contacted to inquire about the design process used in creating the sites. As stated earlier, visual examples of Aboriginal cultures in the mainstream media display some of the most blatant and obvious stereotypes. Avoiding these kinds of stereotypes is not difficult, but there are many more subtle forms of stereotype that are more difficult to recognize. When looking for materials about how to design digital media that are culturally appropriate, there were few sources available. After a broad review of several web sites was completed, four web sites were selected for more detailed evaluation (Appendix C).

Symbols

There appeared to be a tendency for educational web sites, that dealt with Aboriginal content, to focus on the history of Aboriginal cultures. Phrases like "used to" or "in the past" seemed common on many sites. As stated earlier in the literature review, viewing Aboriginal cultures as "timeless" and "unchanging" can foster misconceptions, paternalistic treatment of Aboriginal cultures and at worst racist assumptions of inferiority of Aboriginal cultures. It also seemed that many of the web sites either used what could be perceived as cliché symbols like headdresses and feathers or they did not visually represent the Aboriginal content in the site design at all. Without a more thorough understanding of Aboriginal cultures it is difficult to judge whether or not the use of the symbols mentioned above is cliché or not. One possible theory for this perception of the symbols as cliché, could be that the visual treatment of the symbols suggested a casual use that did not demonstrate their importance and complexity. The navigation on most sites used existing conventions of web site design; however, some tried to use navigation based on metaphors. These metaphors were often based on the symbol of the circle and the four directions.

Colour

In order to evaluate the use of colour more closely several colour palettes from various web sites were collected. Of the colour palettes reviewed, various shades of red, gold yellow and brown seemed common (Figure 5). Some showed highly saturated colour and varied from warm to cool tones, but most seem to use warm tones and less saturated colour. Web sites designed for Aboriginal youth seemed to use more saturated colour than the other web sites examined. Without having evaluated a more significant number of colour palettes, it is difficult to make any conclusive statements about use of colour for these types of web sites; however, while the examination of colour did not provide any conclusions for the development of a colour palette for the resource, it was a valuable preliminary survey of materials similar to the proposed resource. This kind of evaluation is a necessary part of any design process, because it can provide some insight into the context in which the resource may be viewed.

Web Site Design

Two sources proved valuable in guiding the more comprehensive evaluation of the four selected web sites: a web site evaluation created by a doctoral student titled *Techniques for Evaluating American Indian Web Sites* (Appendix C) and the *Oyate* organization. Elaine Cubbins is a doctoral student at the University of Arizona in the Department of Library Studies. Although this is not a published source, discussion with Elaine Cubbins and a search of the University of Arizona web site supports her as a credible source. After an extensive search, this source seems to be the only one designed specifically for evaluating web sites that contain Aboriginal material.

The recommendations made in this document, while useful in shaping some of the evaluation criteria, refer only to content and credibility. A source that would assist in developing visual criteria was still needed. To date, no resources have been located that analyze the visual design of web sites for Aboriginal cultures.

“Oyate is a Native organization working to see that our lives and histories are portrayed honestly, and so that all people will know our stories belong to us. For Native children, it is as important as it has ever been for them to know who they are and what they come from. It is a matter of survival. For all children, it is time to learn the truth of history. Only in this way will they come to have the understanding and respect for each other that now, more than ever, will be necessary for life to continue.” – Oyate Organization, 1995–2005, ¶1

The *Oyate* organization has produced several resources that evaluate children's books. The books are evaluated for content as well as for illustrations. Even though the books evaluated are for children, several important observations are made, regarding visuals, that could be applied to the evaluation of the web sites selected for review, and for the visual design of the proposed prototype.

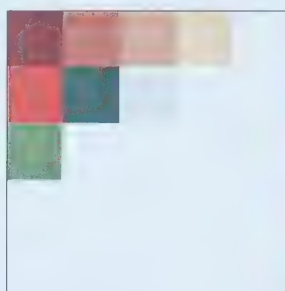
An evaluation template was created before analyzing any of the selected web sites (Appendix C). Many of the categories selected for evaluation were typical of other web site evaluations; however, a category concerning cultural representation was also added to evaluate the design as it relates to the cultures represented. This section was

Web Site Evaluations

Figure 5 Web site colour palettes



Keyanaw Etutor,
University of Saskatchewan



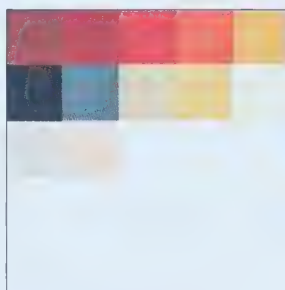
Circle of Stories, PBS



Spirit Magazine



Nitsitapiisinni – Our Way of Life, Glenbow Museum



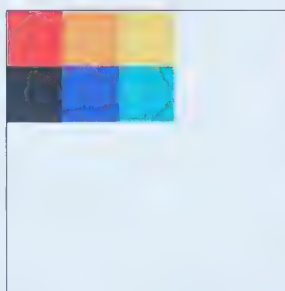
Kumeyaay Community College



Museum of the American Indian



Aboriginal Youth Network



Say Magazine for Aboriginal youth



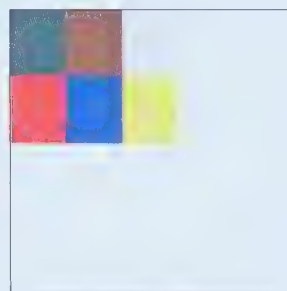
Maskwachees Cultural College



AMMSA – Aboriginal Multimedia Society



En'owkin Centre



Ahtabasca Centre for World Indigenous Knowledge & Research

divided into three sub-sections: context, visuals and language. In the cultural representation section, context refers to the context in which the cultural materials are presented. For example, this section might discuss how a site used both historical and contemporary imagery, or how techniques of visual representation were used to communicate diversity. The “visuals” and “language” sections reviewed the perspective that imagery and language convey.

All four web sites were selected because they are similar, either in content or purpose, to the prototype. Three of the four web sites have educational purposes, and all of them have content specific to Aboriginal cultures. The four web sites selected were:

1. *Circle of Stories*, Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBS)
2. *Nitsitapiisinni – Our Way of Life*, Glenbow Museum
3. *Spirit Magazine*
4. *Keyanaw eTutor*, University of Saskatchewan

1. *Keyanaw eTutor* <http://www.etutor.usask.ca/>

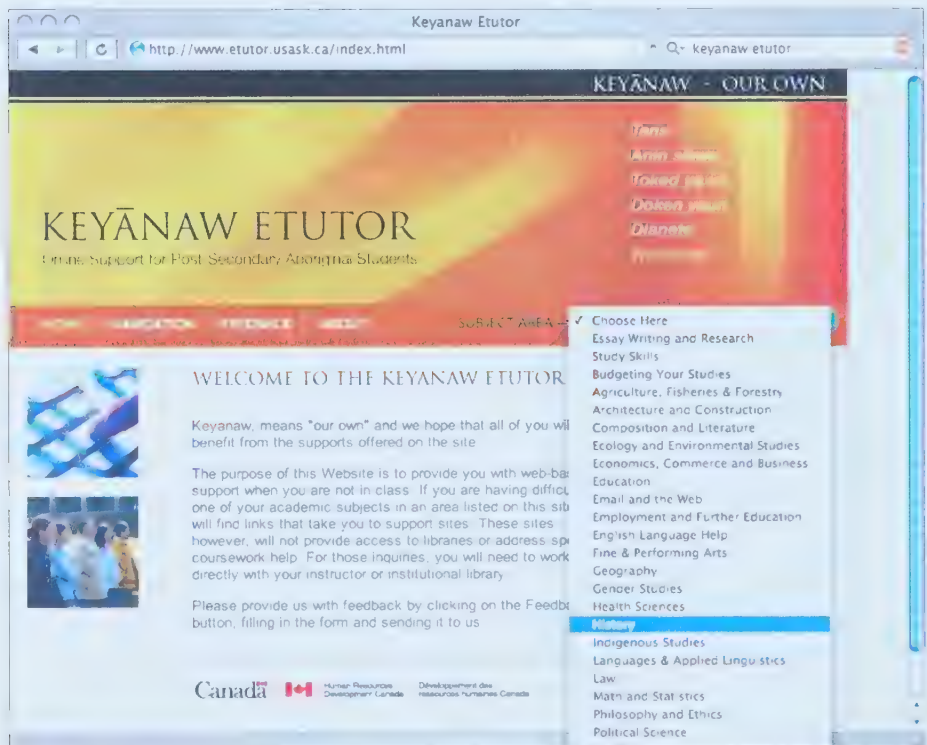


Figure 6 *Keyanaw eTutor* home page, University of Saskatchewan

The *Keyanaw eTutor* was created by University of Saskatchewan researchers. Its purpose is to serve as a web resource for Aboriginal undergraduate students at the University of Saskatchewan. At present, it is in a preliminary testing phase at the University and researchers are still collecting feedback about the site from students. This site was selected because, similar to the resource being developed, it has to address the task of visually representing both the University and Aboriginal cultures.

The visual appearance of the site blends a formal and an informal aesthetic. The serif typeface used for headings and the placement of text on the web site is fairly formal, but the sans-serif typeface used for body text is more “approachable” (Figure 6). The language used is also informal and approachable. Warm colours aid in making this web site feel inviting to visitors. The use of uppercase headings in the more formal serif typeface could make the web site seem less inviting and perhaps too formal. It appears that the site designers were mixing warm colours and casual language with some more formal visual elements like serif text and rules to divide content, in order to balance two purposes—first, the site needs to feel like an academic site that is associated with the University of Saskatchewan, second, the site needs to address visually the Aboriginal students that will be using it.

In addition to the main page, smaller images are used in the left and right columns of the three column layout. These images are perhaps the weakest visual design elements on the page. The images look like stock photography, and the content does not seem to relate, in any meaningful way, to the content of the site or to the audience. For example, an image of a keyboard is used for no obvious purpose, except perhaps to fill space on the page.

Before proceeding with the evaluation it is important to define two key terminologies used in web site evaluations:

Usability

Usability refers to the ease with which people are able use an object. It can also refer to the method of study that measures the ease of use of objects.

Affordance

An affordance is a property of an object or feature that indicates how to use or interact with the object or feature.

A drop-down menu is used as the main navigation for the site, which poses more problems when basic usability principles are considered (see Figure 6). This menu provides no opportunity to indicate visually to the user which items they have already selected or which page they are on. Because the user is given no information that indicates where they are in the site, or where they can go, we can conclude that it does not support principles of affordance (Nielsen, 2000). There are also 28 items in this menu that are not visible to the user at all times. The user has to remember each item, or continuously click on the jump menu to see the selections. Some items in the menu don't match exactly the headings used for each section, which creates additional confusion. For example, the menu item “Essay Writing and Research”

is labeled "Researching and Essay Writing" on the actual page. It is a subtle difference, but one that can cause considerable confusion for viewers. There also appears to be no logical organization of items in the drop-down menu which complicates navigation further.

One of the most interesting visual features of the page is the use of a large image in the page heading. This abstract image uses warm tones of red, orange and yellow. In this large image the viewer can just make out what looks like feathers or leaves. These are layered beneath bands of gold and orange making the reference subtle. It seems to be referring to the natural world, but in a subtle way that does not reference any particular geographic area or element of nature.

2. *Circle of Stories* (PBS) <http://www.pbs.org/circleofstories/>

The purpose of this site is to explore Native American storytelling using documentary film, photography and fine art. The lesson plans provided with the site are for grades 6 to 12, so it can be assumed that this would be the main viewing audience.

Four storytellers are profiled on the site. Each tells a story that can be accessed by the viewer in several combinations of formats: animation, audio, text and photos. The multimedia presentation of the stories is quite large and runs slowly even on a high speed connection. In order to access this portion of the site the viewer must click on a symbol of the four directions. There is an interesting layering of images in the multimedia presentation. Landscapes and maps show where the story and storyteller are from. The use of separate colour palettes for each storyteller serves to differentiate the four storytellers. The site uses a warm colour palette of earth tones, with brown, red and green being the most common colours. Rough edges around shapes and added textures seem to have been added to reference the natural world (Figure 7).

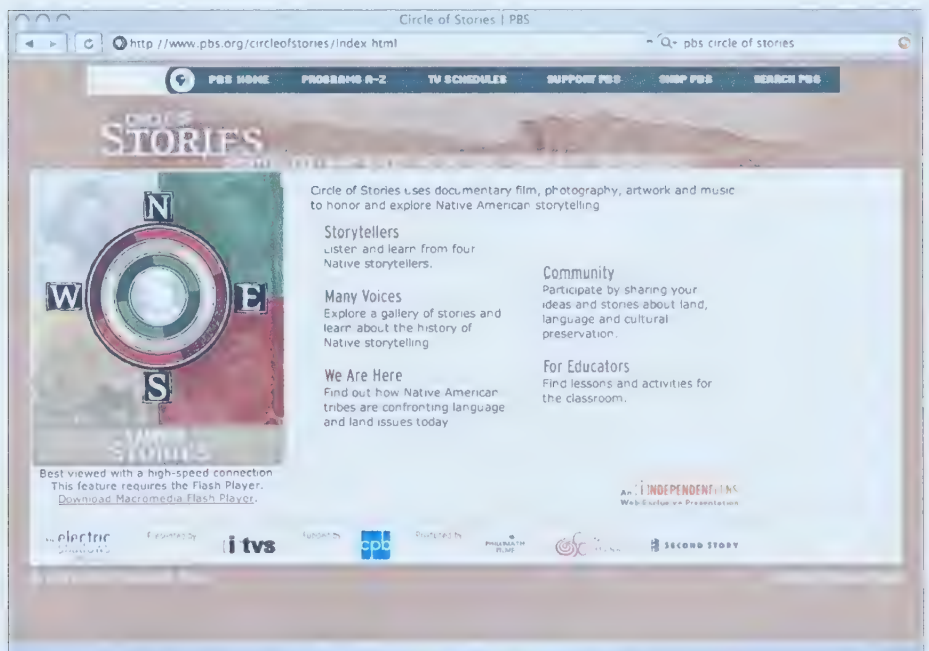


Figure 7 *Circle of Stories* home page, Public Broadcasting Corporation

The content and visuals used on the site balance historical and contemporary aspects of Aboriginal cultures well. For example, in the story "The Cooking Spirit" told by Rosella Archdale, both contemporary and historical images are used. This juxtaposition of images suggests a the continuity of customs, but it also serves to illustrate the contrast between contemporary society and the past.

The navigation for the site contains some unnecessary repetition of menu items and some labels for items do not clearly describe the page to which the link will take you. Because the visual hierarchy of the pages is not clear there is a danger that visitors might miss certain parts of the site.

The site exhibits the successful integration of historical and contemporary images and the use of varied media for the stories. The use of texture and rough edges might take the reference to the natural world to the point of exaggeration, but there are some successful aspects of the image use and colour palette that are worth noting.

3. *Nitsitapiisinni – Our Way of Life* (Glenbow Museum)

<http://www.glenbow.org/blackfoot>

The purpose of this web site is to present a virtual museum exhibit on Blackfoot history and culture from the perspective of Blackfoot community members. According to the site's creators the web site was created for grades 4 to 6 (Alberta Online Consortium, 2004, ¶1).

Both a *Macromedia Flash* and html version of the site are provided for visitors. Generally, the navigation is clear and consistent. The *Flash* version requires extensive use of the mouse and the number of pop-up windows could cause confusion for novice users or frustration for users returning to the site. In the *Flash* version the use of symbols without text in the main menu makes it difficult to remember the purpose of each link. Although the information seems fairly well organized, into the five main sections, inconsistencies in the navigation confuse the information structure of the site.

More emphasis is placed on the Blackfoot way of life in the past than on contemporary life. Depending on the way the site is used by educators, it could present a skewed vision of contemporary Blackfoot culture, or worse, a view of the culture as something from the past that no longer exists in present day. Visual distinctions are made between past and present, using photography for the present and illustration for the past. The organization of content in the *Flash* version is divided into too many small sections that require extensive opening and closing of windows.

The mix of photography and illustration blend well together. Animation of the illustrated figures adds a playful quality to the site appropriate to the age group. Text is handled consistently and even the casual script that is used is legible. There is a roughness about the appearance of the site conveyed through textures in such a way that it seems meant to imitate natural elements. Beiges and browns reflect the prairies which is the traditional territory of the Blackfoot. (These colours are also probably reminiscent of the buffalo.) Over-used visual elements, like textures and animal skins, create visual noise that interferes with the clarity communication (Figure 8).



Figure 8 *Niitsitapiisini: Our Way of Life*, Glenbow Museum.
Overuse of animal skins creates visual clutter that interferes with information.

Some illustrations seem to lack cultural sensitivity if compared to guidelines set out by the *Oyate* organization. For example, in the section on family, an illustration of a family in a tipi is shown with every member of the family having the same face (Figure 9). According to Slapin, Seale and Gonzales (2000) this is called tokenism, which can support stereotyping of Aboriginal peoples. Their faces are stylized and cartoon-like and don't fit the visual style of other illustrations on the site.

One concern of many Aboriginal communities today is that their society not be seen as a society that only existed in the past (Slapin, Seale and Gonzales, 2000). The traditional stories on the site do not come with any genealogy to explain who is telling them and whether or not permission to tell them has been given by the community. This is a major concern when analyzing credibility of the site.

An additional concern is that the web site states that it was created in collaboration with the Blackfoot people, but does not list any official Blackfoot organization. This could mean that the site is only representative of the knowledge and beliefs of a few Blackfoot individuals. However, information can be found that shows continued cooperation between the Blackfoot Confederation and the Glenbow Museum, so it seems reasonable to assume that the individuals working on the site were speaking for the Blackfoot community with their permission. To the credit of the site, the teacher toolkit does include additional information about Blackfoot culture and a recommended protocol for teaching students about the culture.



Figure 9 *Niitsitapiisini: Our Way of Life*, Glenbow Museum. Some illustrations display elements of tokenism.

4. *Spirit Magazine* <http://www.spiritmag.ca>

The purpose of the web site is to promote the magazine. *Spirit Magazine* was created to "...provide diverse perspectives on Canadian identity and culture through the experiences and expressions of Aboriginal Canadians." ("*Spirit Magazine*", n.d.) The audience for this web site are Aboriginal youth and young adults under 35 ("*Spirit Magazine*", n.d.). The "Community" page describes their team as "youth-driven" and the language used is specific to a younger audience.

Of all four sites reviewed, this web site has the most problems with functionality. The use of *iFrames* to load text into the content window was probably implemented to allow the magazine staff to upload and update site content without a webmaster. However, full html pages are being loaded into a window that is too small to fit the pages; this forces users to scroll both vertically and horizontally (Figure 10). Trying to read text or view images by scrolling in this way is difficult and potentially frustrating for users. This problem with viewing also reduces the professional appearance of the site and, therefore, reduces credibility of the site. Although this magazine is marketed towards youth and used colloquial language, as a commercial venture it should maintain some level of professionalism.

The visual appearance of the site is similar to many other web sites marketed to young adults. A bright saturated colour palette is used. Bright colour and texture and image use give it a visual energy and dynamism. Unfortunately the dominance of image over text seems to diminish the importance of the content. Strong varied

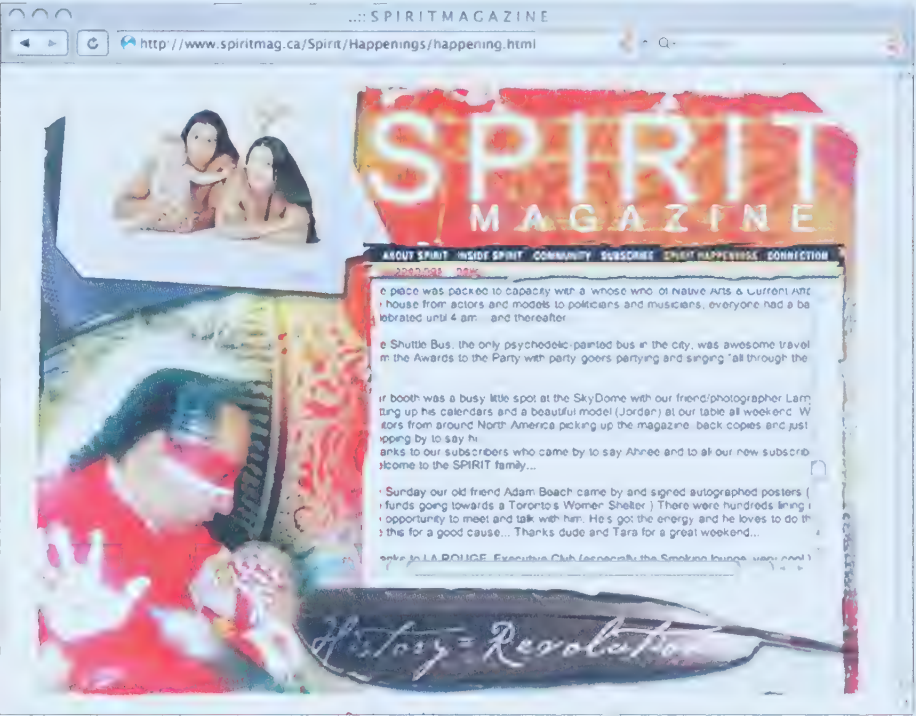


Figure 10 Spirit Magazine, Technical errors require users to scroll horizontally and vertically to read text.

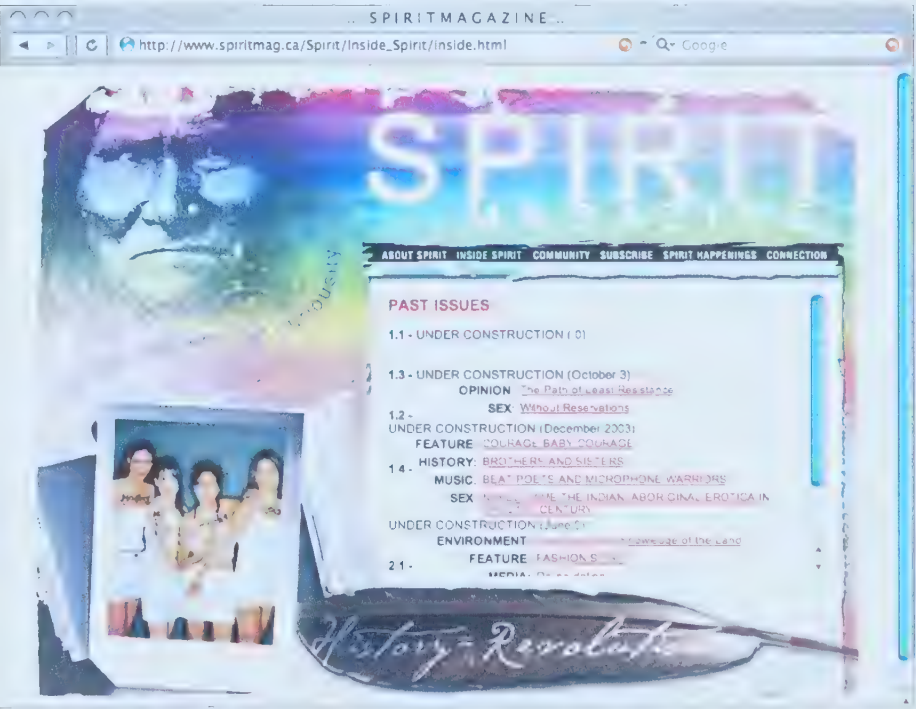


Figure 11 Spirit Magazine, Collage is used to integrate traditional and contemporary images.

colour, *Photoshop* filter effects and busy collages make this site somewhat visually chaotic. However, the use of collage is an interesting technique to blend both contemporary and traditional images (Figure 11). In contrast to the Glenbow site, the focus of this site is on the contemporary, with minimal attention being paid to the historical.

Although some may think that the images are overworked and that the many *Photoshop* effects and filters create visual clutter that distract from the content, the representation of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures shown here is handled well, and is well balanced with the task of marketing to a young audience. Without being a member of the specific target group, it is difficult to assess the appeal of the site or the use of particular images for cultural representation. Nevertheless, the diversity represented by the images is certainly in line with recommendations from several sources that discuss methods for breaking visual stereotypes in the representation of Aboriginal culture.

Summary of Web Site Evaluations

The use of audio, video and photography to tell stories in the PBS and Glenbow web sites successfully brought the stories to life and connected them with real people. In these examples multimedia seemed to suit the subject. Most sites functioned well, but all four had major problems with the organization of content and visual hierarchies. Three of the four sites used warm earth tones in the colour palettes. The *Spirit Magazine* web site, which is marketed towards youth, was the only site to depart from this colour palette. All four sites were examined for credibility and all four appeared credible. As a result of this evaluation, certain features emerged that could be useful to consider for the design of the prototype:

- imagery to represent historical and contemporary culture
- warm earth tones in red, gold, brown, green and yellow
- abstract references to the natural world
- various combinations of media utilized for storytelling
- collage or layering of images to combine historical and contemporary images
- an aesthetic that balances formal and casual features in a manner appropriate to an academic web site

Image Exploration Session

An evaluation of existing materials and interviews, conducted with instructors and students, provided valuable information about the content requirements and visual design criteria for the development of the prototype. In order to further explore students' visual preferences another session was conducted with three students who had all completed *English 114* (Appendix D). This session consisted of students viewing pre-selected book covers and writing answers to a set of questions. At the beginning of the session the process was explained, why the questions were being asked and how the students' participation would direct the development of the prototype.

In order to select images that displayed a sufficient range of visual characteristics a visual taxonomy of book covers was created (Figure 12). The characteristics selected described elements of typography, colour, image style, surface and cover style. An attempt was made to select covers that met the varying criteria established in the taxonomy to establish a broad visual range of book covers. Fiction and non-fiction books were selected, including many books which were produced by Aboriginal publishers. Some of the criteria established in the taxonomy were difficult to meet and, therefore, fewer examples were present. For example, book covers that had cool colour palettes were difficult to find.

This session, it was hoped, would help to solicit participation from all students present if students were asked to respond to the questions in writing. A short discussion followed the session.

Students were asked to select three books for each of the four sections in the session:

1. Select three books that best convey a **culturally appropriate view of contemporary Aboriginal culture**. Use only visual criteria to make your selection. Comment briefly on why you think this book is successful in portraying contemporary Aboriginal culture.
2. Select three books that best convey a **culturally appropriate view of traditional Aboriginal culture**. Use only visual criteria to make your selection. Comment briefly on why you think this book is successful in portraying traditional Aboriginal culture.
3. Please select the **three books that you find most visually appealing**. (Imagine you had to select these books in a bookstore solely on their appearance.) Selecting visual elements only, (image style, text style, colour, etc.) Comment on why each book appeals to you. Comment briefly on two or three characteristics that appeal to you.
4. Judging from the title only, select **three book cover designs that you think best suit the content**. For example, you might think about whether or not the style of the image suits the title. Comment briefly on two or three characteristics that suit the content.

	Cover Style					Image Style				Surface		Colour								Typography					
	Photography	Illustration	Stylized	Realistic	Abstract	Literal	Traditional	Contemporary	Type dominant	Image dominant	Matte	Glossy	dark value	light value	natural	unnatural	desaturated	saturated	monochromatic	warm	cool	serif	sans-serif	expressive	minimal
1	Dry Lips Oughta Move...	x		x		x		x		x		x			x	x		x		x		x		x	
2	Transitions	x		x	x	x		x	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x
3	Nothing But the Truth	x	x		x		x		x			x	x		x		x						x		x
4	The Rez Sisters		x			x	x			x		x				x		x				x			
5	The Long Dance	x		x		x		x		x	x		x			x		x							
6	Bent Box		x	x		x		x		x	x		x			x		x				x			x
7	Skins		x		x			x	x			x	x		x		x						x		x
8	My Heart is a Stray Bullet		x			x		x		x	x			x	x		x						x		x
9	Monkey Beach	x	x			x	x			x		x	x		x		x					x			x
10	Arctic Dreams & Nightmares		x			x	x			x	x		x			x				x			x		x
11	The Foot of the River	x		x		x	x			x	x			x		x				x		x			
12	Spirit Horse	x		x		x	x	x		x	x		x			x		x		x		x			x
13	The Native Creative Process	x		x		x	x	x		x		x		x	x		x					x			x
14	Almanac of the Dead		x			x		x		x		x	x			x		x				x			x
15	House Made of Dawn	x		x		x	x			x		x	x		x		x			x		x			x
16	Weesquachak	x		x		x	x			x				x	x		x					x			x
17	Green Grass Running Water	x	x			x	x			x	x			x	x		x						x		x

Figure 12 taxonomy of visual characteristics of book covers

At this point in the study it was already apparent that the resource should contain both historical and contemporary images. The first two questions in the study were designed to assist in deciding upon an approach to this requirement.

Students tended to gravitate to *Monkey Beach* and *Transitions* for section one (Figure 13, 14). Both books rely on photography, earth tones and references to the natural world. In the second section students' answers varied, although the majority selected *Green Grass Running Water* which uses what appears to be traditional illustration and earth tones on the cover (Figure 15).

One interesting aspect to note from this section was that some students picked *Transitions* as both a contemporary and traditional portrayal of Aboriginal culture. One student thought that because the stones were constantly evolving and were part of the land that they were representative of the contemporary and the traditional. Another student mentioned that the industrial feel of the rock landscape suggested the contemporary, but that the rocks were also elements of the "Grandfather, the stones of the earth" and that this suggested the traditional. For similar reasons, *Monkey Beach* was also selected by students as a book cover that represented both the traditional and the contemporary.

When asked to select a book that portrayed contemporary Aboriginal culture *Almanac of the Dead* was selected because the student thought that it was "what people would "expect" from Aboriginal images." The student seemed to be interpreting success in terms of what would be "successful" in commercial Western culture. In fact, the question had been intended to ask the students to comment on what they saw as successful in terms of their own Aboriginal cultural framework. From this student's negative reaction, clearly the cover was not viewed as successful in those terms. This suggests that closer attention to language and its connotations in different contexts might have been necessary. If more time with participants had been available the development of questions for this session and language used would have been done in cooperation with participants. This interpretation has added another important dimension to the study.

The third question in the session was designed to explore students' aesthetic preferences without concern for representations of contemporary or traditional culture. Of the book covers that students found most visually appealing *Skins* and *Monkey Beach* were most popular. The cover image of *Monkey Beach* seemed to appeal most to students. They mentioned several aspects of the image that appealed to them: use of colour, ambiguity of the image, and the relationship portrayed between nature and "man." The text used in *Skins* in combination with the abstract texture of the image appealed most to students (Figure 16).

For the final question students were asked to select images that suited the content of the book judging only the title. Again, *Monkey Beach* and *Skins* were the most popular selections. From the comments made by students, it appears that some books were selected because the student had read the book and knew the cover image suited the content. For example, one student mentioned that *Monkey Beach* was a mysterious novel and that the layering of ghost like images on the cover suited the content. This last section was designed to further explore which images would be suitable for the resource content.

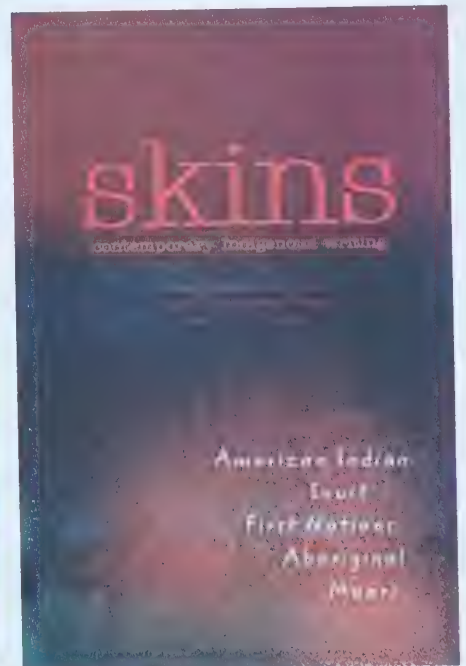
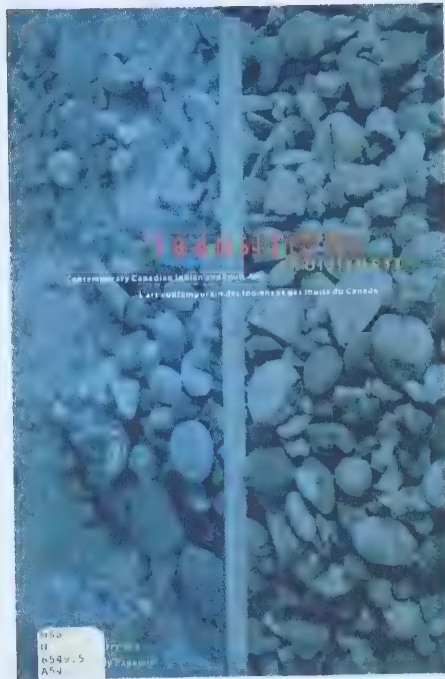


Figure 13-16 Book covers selected by students

A short discussion followed the end of the session. Students were asked if any of the book covers did not appeal to them. All three students mentioned the cover of *My Heart is a Stray Bullet* (Figure 17). They thought that it looked “phoney” and would be something sold at Chapters book stores. The students found the visual style of the illustration too commercial and their reference to “Chapters” had negative connotations because of their view of the book’s “market” appeal. One student tried to explain why it seemed so artificial: “It’s out there to grab, you know, the new age kind of person right?” All of the students expressed negative opinions regarding the “New Age” phenomenon and the appropriations from Aboriginal cultures that resulted from this phenomenon.



Figure 17 *My Heart is a Stray Bullet*
Students disliked the cover because they thought it looked too commercial

Students were also asked what they thought about the session and if they could suggest other ways to learn what their aesthetic preferences were. One participant stated that the session was “easy” and another said that the session “felt rushed.” Another participant thought the session was “effective,” but thought that it might also be useful to ask opinions regarding the books of each person individually. Unfortunately, in order to accommodate participants’ schedules the session lasted only one hour, a circumstance which left insufficient time to discuss the session or the books.

Summary of Image Exploration

Students suggested that in order to make the visual design of the prototype culturally appropriate and to make it appealing to students the following visual attributes should be used:

- a colour palette of earth tones
- images of landscape
- photography as opposed to illustration

These suggestions were also supported by the literature review; however, the possibility that photographs of landscape could suggest both contemporary and traditional Aboriginal culture had not been raised.

From the results of the literature review and empirical research, criteria for the design of the resource were established. The main research question and the two categories established for the research sub-questions were used to organize the established criteria.

Central Research Question

In a cross-cultural design context, how can a digital learning resource be designed in a culturally appropriate way to enrich undergraduate Aboriginal students' appreciation of Aboriginal literature and culture?

Summary of Resource Content and Feature Requirements

Content:

- research assignments and creative writing assignments
- biographical information and information on authors' cultural backgrounds
- links to authors' web sites
- external web site links related to course materials
- historical information, both pre and post-contact
- examples of essays for reference
- links for Modern Language Association and American Psychological Association writing guides
- general essay writing references
- focus on images (because class time focuses on the texts)
- where relevant, Aboriginal languages with definitions of words

Features:

- incorporate a blog or forum for communication and sharing of images and text
- varied media, like images audio and video, should be included
- the opportunity for students to take notes and save them
- available for use in class and at home
- hand in assignments online and contact instructors using the resource
- associative organization of content by theme should be used to encourage a holistic approach to the material
- design should make it easy to find information
- other relevant cultural information, or links for information like music, art, and information about Aboriginal communities should be included

Summary of Visual Design Criteria and Characteristics

Criteria

- the design should represent multiple Aboriginal cultures as well as Western literary conventions
- the design of the should incorporate some common features that exist between Aboriginal cultures in order to address the audience
- specific symbols and iconography may not be appropriate because they may exclude some cultural groups
- an aesthetic is required that balances formal and casual features in a manner appropriate to an academic web site

Characteristics

- juxtaposition of varied media like images and audio
- a warm colour palette of earth tones
- images of landscape – abstract references to the natural world
- photography rather than illustration
- imagery to represent historical and contemporary culture
- collage or layering of images to combine historical and contemporary images

In order to evaluate the criteria established for the resource, a preliminary prototype was developed (Figures 18–21). Key sections, or screens, were created in order to demonstrate how the criteria informed the visual design. *Monkey Beach* was selected from the reading list to use as an example because it is a novel that participants thought would benefit from the addition of extra resources. According to participants, images of plants, geographic areas and maps would serve to clarify some portions of the novel for students.

As stated earlier in the document, the course readings are organized according to the following themes:

- the politics of language
- the tools of language
- community/relationality
- orality/performance
- growing up and identities

The theme “tools of language” was selected for the design of the prototype because its sub-themes presented a greater design challenge in terms of complexity. Instructors split the theme “tools of language” into four sub-themes: symbolism, irony, metaphor/simile and humour.

It was stated in the introduction that at this preliminary stage of the study, a paper prototype was ideal for the examination of culturally appropriate visual design. Because a functional prototype was not created, some requirements identified by participants were not explored. For example, an exploration of the technical considerations required to allow students to access the resource from home and at school were not explored. While it was necessary to identify functional requirements to complete the visual design of the prototype, it was not the main purpose of this study.

Organization and Structure

The resource was developed as a web site because of the need for it to be available to students at home and at school. A functional version of the prototype would need to include a log in screen for students and instructors to prevent public access to the resource. To provide the opportunity for students to explore the resource in an associative manner, a non-linear structure had to be created for the prototype. Many affordances for action were made available to students to allow them to navigate the resource freely. To make these affordances for action clear, all main navigation options were made visually apparent to students in all sections of the resource. The resource was divided into five main sections: *Themes*, *Resources*, *Instructors*, *Forum*, and *Help*.

Only a few key screens were designed at this stage of the study. Designing a space for the literature was probably one of the most difficult challenges in creating a culturally appropriate design. The majority of the screens designed were created for the *Themes* section because it was the location for the literature. Further research would be needed to design the *Forum*, *Instructors* and *Help* sections, an undertaking which is beyond the scope of this study.

In the themes section, a drop-down menu reveals the themes by which the course readings are organized (Figure 18). When a theme that has sub-themes is selected, these sub-themes also need to be apparent to users immediately. A side menu was created on the “tools of language” screen to show how these sub-themes might be displayed. When the user selects the sub-theme, a list of readings from which they can make a selection is displayed (Figure 19). A student can move to any theme or sub-theme, at any point, while using the resource. Their movement through the resource is not limited by linear restrictions.

Some readings, and authors fall under more than one theme. To help students see this overlap, a screen was created that showed all the readings in one area (Figure 20). The fact that some authors and readings appear within more than one theme emphasizes the concept of inter-connectedness and further enhances a holistic view of the literature. These connections are indicated visually when a user moves the mouse over a listed reading. A single screen was designed for the *Resources* section to demonstrate colour and image differences among sections (Figure 21).

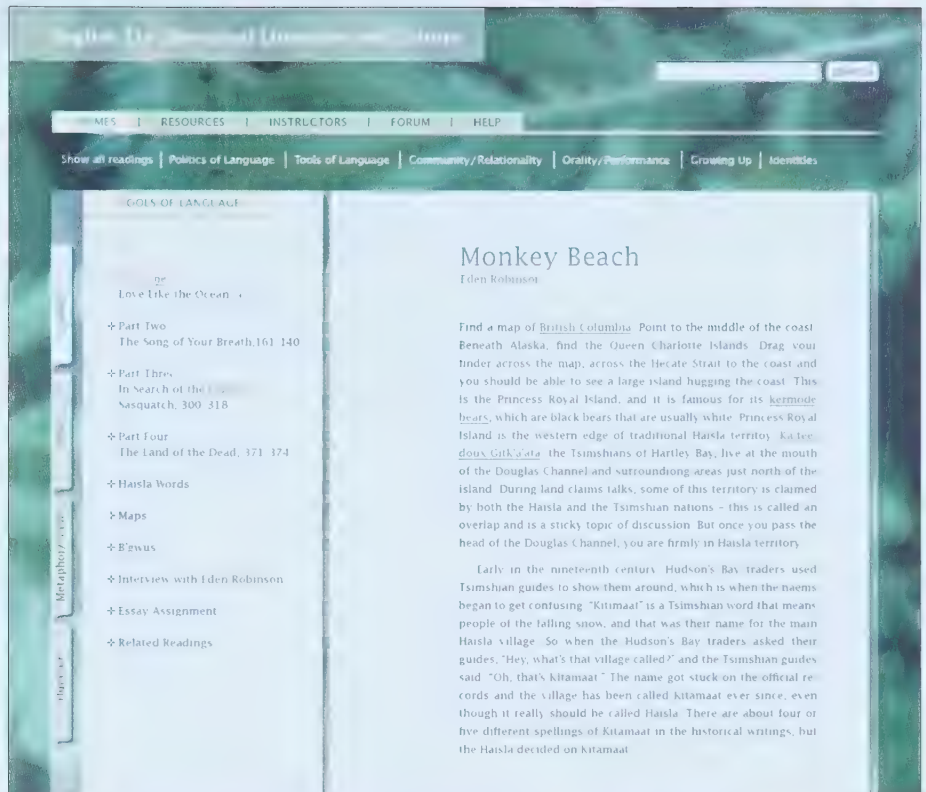


Figure 18 Themes "Tools of Language" – a drop down menu displays themes



Figure 19 Symbolism – users can select sub-themes from a tab menu



Figure 20 All Readings – author's works are highlighted to show overlap among themes

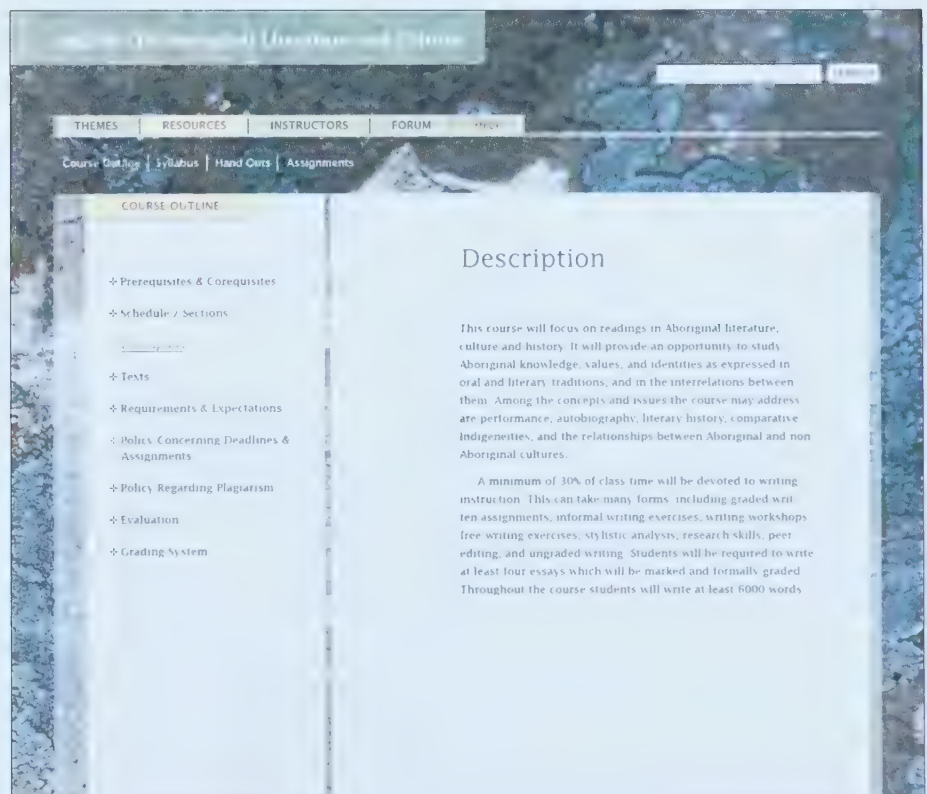


Figure 21 Resources – each of the five main sections has a different background image

Literary Conventions

One of the most difficult aspects of designing the prototype was to create visuals that represented multiple Aboriginal cultures and also incorporated Western literary conventions. In order to convey Western literary conventions visually, the design of the literature sections mimic book design in page proportion and layout.

Because some text would be read on screen, it was important to create a comfortable reading space for students on the screen. Subdued colour and a simple layout aid in creating a comfortable reading space. It is important to note that students suggested that the layout of the prototype should be free of visual clutter in order to make it easier for them to use. An off-white background colour was used for text pages to reduce glare and visual fatigue. In addition, larger than normal type size and leading, were used than would be used for print documents.

The Lucida type family was selected for all text on the resource. Lucida is the largest type family in the world and was selected because of the legibility and variety of weights available in both the serif and sans. In order to adhere to conventions of book design Lucida serif was used for all body text. The serif adds some formality to the appearance of the prototype, while the short thick serifs and irregular shapes created by the change in stroke width of the typeface prevent it from feeling overly formal. Lucida sans was used for menu items to create a clear distinction between content and navigation. Robert Bringhurst (2004) states that Lucida sans-serif is one of the best sansserifs for ordinary text. "*It has a poise, simplicity and energy that many serifed faces lack.*" (p. 243)

Imagery: Landscape

The importance of the natural world was identified by many sources as a common feature between Aboriginal cultures and it was also recommended by participants that landscapes be included in the resource. Before attempting to create the prototype, it was necessary to explore the portrayal of landscape from an Aboriginal perspective. A brief review of literature in the discipline of art history reveals that Western and Aboriginal conceptions of landscape can differ greatly.

According to Lippard (1990) portrayal of the land by Aboriginal artists has very little to do with constructing "scenery." In Western artwork the land is often portrayed as a passive vista. In contrast, Aboriginal artists often portray landscape in a symbolic way. Lippard (1990) states that "In accordance with the symbolic complexity of Native concepts of nature, abstraction is favored by many contemporary artists as a way to render the loved terrain." (p. 109) It is also important to note that Lippard (1990) makes a distinction between landscape and nature in art: "Nature is an all encompassing force....No matter how convincingly or realistically depicted landscape may be, as a Western genre it is usually a stage set for human activities, the object of the benevolent or wary human gaze." (p. 109) Lippard's description of Aboriginal artists' conceptions of landscape suggested that the use of abstraction, as a means of representing nature in the prototype, might be more in accordance with an Aboriginal perspective. Therefore the prototype did not have to literally portray a landscape, but could suggest a landscape in some abstract way.

Because the natural world was identified as important to many Aboriginal cultures a visual reference to the natural world was adapted as part of the overall appearance of the resource. Abstract images of natural elements were used as backgrounds in all five sections of the resource. To create the images photographs of plants were taken in the Native Peoples' Garden at the Devonian Botanic Gardens. In order to focus on texture and shape, a macro lens was used for all of the photographs. The textures and colours of leaves, berries, wood, earth and rocks were photographed. These photographs were then blurred when placed as background images to further abstract the image.

This abstraction was created for several reasons:

- to prevent the background images from competing with the content
- to create images that refer to natural elements without referring to a specific geographic location, thus preventing the exclusion of any cultural group not represented by the image
- to attempt to create an image that is more in accord with an Aboriginal perspective

A natural colour palette of earth tones was based on colour from within the photographs. Each section has a slightly different colour palette and different background image to create a visual separation of sections for the users. When a section is selected, the text colour changes to indicate to the user which screen they are on. The text colour of the main sections matches the sub-section selected to further clarify the relationship and location of the user. For example, when "themes" is selected the text colour turns blue, when "tools of language" is selected the text for this sub-section is also blue (see Figure 18). Very few symbolic references were used for the prototype, except for the bullets created for the side menus (see Figure 18). These bullets could be interpreted as symbolic of the four directions, but were intended to be subtle enough that they are open to interpretation.

Media

When media, like images and video, are used in relation to text they are shown in a separate pop-up window because students expressed the concern that images and other media not interrupt their reading process unless they chose to view them (Figure 22). Other media would be displayed in the main window. For example, an interview with one of the authors would be shown in the main window.

Functional Prototype

Some options for a functional version of the prototype were investigated to ensure that the proposed features would be possible. This investigation revealed that several platform options could be selected that would allow instructors to update content without having to learn new software. Updates to the resource would not involve any major changes to the resource because the organization of the resource by theme allows instructors to update content without having to change any of the main menus. Thus a preliminary investigation into technical requirements suggests that the proposed features of the resource are feasible.

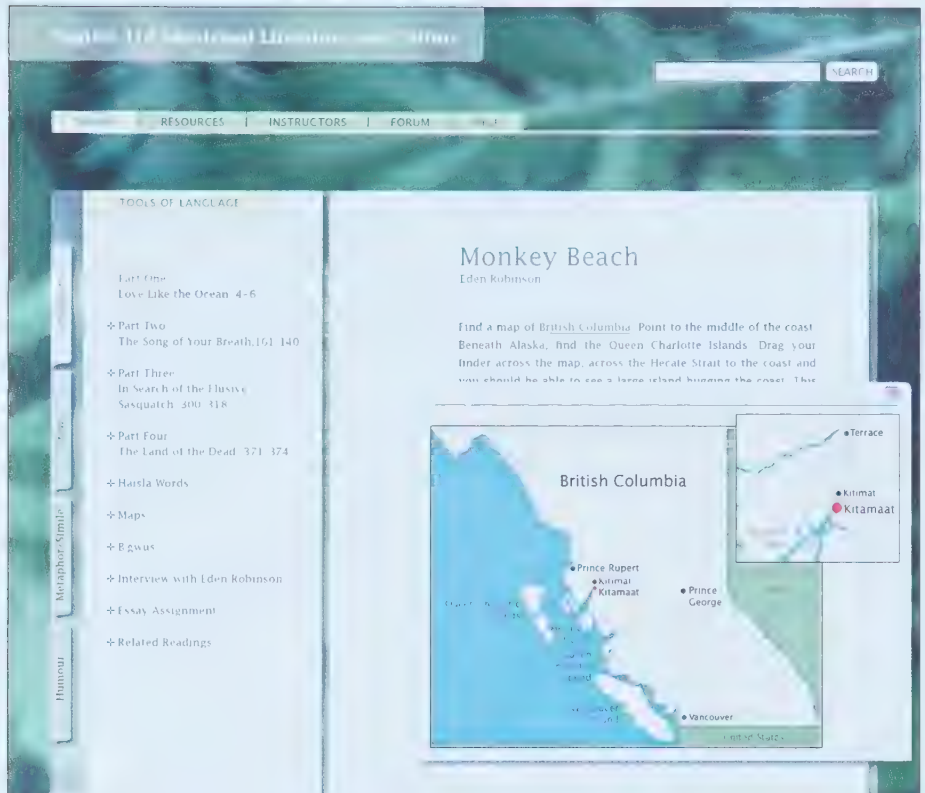


Figure 22 *Themes* – when users click on a link in the text a pop-up window appears

Summary of the Prototype Development

After completion of the design, the prototype was reviewed by the lead instructor who gave it a favourable response. The resource was to represent visually multiple Aboriginal cultures and aspects of Western literary traditions. This was achieved by using subtle visual references to both Aboriginal cultures and Western literary traditions. Using specific cultural references to either culture could have excluded some users. The research suggested a strong connection to the land among many Aboriginal cultures. Non-specific, abstract images may appear vague to some, but have the advantage of not being exclusive by appealing to a particular audience. In addition, during the image exploration session, students had a positive response to such images because of their strong connection to the land.

Limitations

The results of this study indicated that the proposed resource could be beneficial to both instructors and students. There were some important qualifications that should be noted, most of which are related to the scope of the research.

Although the focus of this study was on preliminary approaches to cross-cultural design involving Aboriginal cultures the another process in the research study had been planned. Participatory design sessions were going to be conducted with instructors and students. In these sessions, participants would have worked as groups to sketch their own version of the prototype. As with other phases of research, instructor and student sessions would have been conducted separately. This was viewed as an important process to investigate collaboration, but due to several complex factors these sessions had to be cancelled. First, it was difficult to arrange times with participants because of their busy schedules, but there also seemed to be a reluctance to participate in this process. There are several possible explanations for this reluctance; for example, some may have felt intimidated by being asked to draw, some may have thought that the process was not valuable, or some may have thought that too much was being asked of them as participants. Some participants seemed interested in testing a functional prototype, but were not interested in the participatory design session. The reasons for the reluctance to participate are unclear, but new strategies for this approach should be developed in future. Perhaps if more explanation of the process and its value to the research had been given participants might have been more enthusiastic. The term “participatory design” may also have sounded overly complex and intimidating to participants who were hesitant to draw in a public setting.

Although the design phase of the study would have benefited from this session, there was certainly enough data collected to create a preliminary version of the resource. It is also important, in any study that adopts a collaborative approach, to listen to and change strategies in cooperation with participants. It is possible that participants thought that enough research had been conducted for this phase of the study and that they did not wish to contribute further.

The image exploration session relied too much on writing which was fatiguing for participants. The limited time allotted for discussion did not allow participants to discuss their impressions of the images in more depth. If this session were repeated the writing portion would be reduced significantly.

It is important to note that although one of the goals of this study was to explore collaborative methods, it was not always possible to utilize collaborative processes to the extent that was originally planned. Because of the constraints of a master's thesis, the degree of collaboration possible was also limited to considerations of time, finances and the willingness and availability of participants.

Considerations

The cross-cultural design context described in this document was complex. From an examination of the research methods used in this thesis, some considerations for this particular design context are identified as well as considerations for similar design contexts.

The process of research in this context was social in nature. Dialogue with participants played a critical role in informing the design approach, not only in gathering information, but also in understanding the genealogy of the perspective of those that are consulted. In order to engage with participants in a meaningful way, in any collaborative environment, trust must be established between researchers and participants. This trust must be based on mutual respect and understanding. When the designer is less familiar with the values and beliefs of the research participants, as is the case in this context, the research process often requires a large time commitment on the part of the designer.

Flexibility on the part of the designer is also critical because, in this type of collaborative endeavor, the designer must be able to adapt to changing contexts. The research design for this thesis went through several iterations and portions of the study were consequently altered, or even dropped, from the study according to input from participants. More importantly designers should be open to challenging their own beliefs, values and epistemologies. Designers interested in cross-cultural design must become accustomed to challenging their own belief systems, as a necessary, and potentially uncomfortable, part of the process.

These challenges to epistemology can lead to changes in the research methods. Some of the most useful information for this study came from dialogues. The social process of interviewing and talking casually with various professionals informed the design of the prototype in ways that are not measurable, but that are no less valuable than measurable data.

In addition to all of the considerations mentioned above, the designer must be more conscious of the design process itself. The potential difficulty of this process is that a designer's attention can be diverted away from the design itself. One of the most difficult challenges a designer must face, in a collaborative cross-cultural context, is understanding when one's professional expertise is valid and when it should be challenged by new epistemologies.

Future Directions for Study

A participatory design session and further testing of the paper prototype would be needed in order to further refine criteria for a second iteration of the prototype. Eventually, an examination the proposed features of the resource should be tested, with students, using a functioning prototype. More exploration of technical requirements and limitations should also be completed. The translation of oral literature into digital media is another complex problem that requires more in-depth study. In fact, the complexities of this problem alone warrant independent study in a separate research project.

The purpose of this study was to discover important considerations for non-Aboriginal designers working with Aboriginal clients and to develop a prototype that explores how linked digital media can enrich undergraduate students' appreciation of Aboriginal Canadian literature. Initial research suggests that the digital learning resource may enrich students' appreciation of the literature by providing access to the literature, in an associative way, that allows them to discover their own connections in the content. Instructors could also benefit from closer contact with other instructors and students through the use of the resource. The resource is not intended to replace existing instruction, but to supplement it.

Postmodern philosophies have influenced many contemporary visual communication design strategies. There is a belief that, in order to communicate to an audience in a meaningful way, a designer needs to tailor the visual characteristics of that communication to a specific audience. In contrast, this study suggests that in a cross-cultural design context, in order to address an audience in a meaningful way, the visual characteristics should be broad enough that they can appeal to multiple cultures. Because the connection to the natural world amongst many Aboriginal cultures is strong, it was observed in the image exploration session that abstract reference to the natural world, in a general way, proved meaningful to participants.

The process of designing the prototype for this resource has informed more than the visual design of the resource. It has also helped clarify the processes by which designers can enter into a cross-cultural design context. One of the most important findings from this study is that, in a cross-cultural design context, there can be no set methodologies to develop culturally appropriate design solutions. The processes employed depend on the designer, the client and the context.

Designers working in cross-cultural contexts should develop special skills to act as mediators and advocates for the subject they are communicating. They should learn to view material from multiple viewpoints, research their content thoroughly, work collaboratively with research partners, and look critically at the content. Similar to a non-Aboriginal instructor teaching Aboriginal Canadian Literature, non-Aboriginal designers should be aware that they cannot act from a position of neutrality. Awareness of this subjective position and of the subject matter is crucial for the design of effective cross-cultural communications.

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APPENDICES

A QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

Linda Smith: *Decolonizing Mythologies*

B INTERVIEWS

Instructor Information Letter & Consent Form

Student Information Letter & Consent Form

Instructor Interview Questions

Student Interview Questions

C WEB SITE EVALUATIONS

Elaine Cubbins: *Techniques for Evaluating
American Indian Web Sites*

Survey of Web Sites

Evaluation Template

Evaluations

D IMAGE EXPLORATION SESSION

List of Book Covers

Protocol

Work Sheets

Images

Response to Linda Smith's Questions for non-Aboriginal researchers (*Decolonizing Methodologies*)

1. *Who defined the research problem?*
The research problem came from existing literature, and from assistance from an *English 114* instructor, however the interest in exploring methodology and processes in cross-cultural design were from the researcher.
2. *For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?*
Instructors and students have stated that the availability of the proposed resource would be helpful for students and instructors.
3. *What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?*
The researcher will gain a deeper understanding of Aboriginal literature and cultures, but will also gain a deeper understanding of processes that might be beneficial in cross-cultural design contexts.
4. *What knowledge will the community gain from this study?*
Instructors, students and the researcher think that the creation of the proposed resource could be very valuable to students. Although there are no measurable learning outcomes of this study, this resource could enrich students appreciation of the literature they are studying.
5. *What are some likely positive outcomes for this study?*
Recommendations made in the study could lead to the creation of the proposed prototype, which in turn will potentially benefit students and instructors involved with *English 114*. Designers reading this study might also increase their awareness of the complexities involved in cross-cultural design.
6. *What are some possible negative outcomes?*
Students and instructors might find that the prototype designed is not culturally sensitive in its visual design.
7. *How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?*
Extensive interviews and testing of the prototype could reduce negative reaction to the prototype
8. *To whom is the researcher accountable?*
The researcher is accountable to the thesis supervisor, and other faculty in the department of Art and Design, and is also accountable to the Faculty of Arts REB.
9. *What processes are in place to support the research, the researched and the researcher?*
The researcher receives support from the departments of Art and Design, English and Film studies and Educational Policy Studies.

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEWS

Instructor and Content Expert Information Letter / Consent Form

Study Information

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted for my Master of Design thesis. The purpose of this research project is to gain insight into how Visual Communication Design can enrich students' appreciation of Aboriginal Canadian Literature. This research is being conducted by Andrea Ruskin, MDes candidate, Department of Art and Design, Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be interviewed for approximately one hour. This interview will be recorded. If you consent, your words may be quoted in a thesis document and exhibition. The researcher and research assistants associated with this project will comply with the *University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants*. Data recorded in the course of this research will be available only to myself and the assistants, who have signed confidentiality agreements.

There are no known risks involved in participation in this study. By participating in this study you will be helping to develop a resource that could enrich students' appreciation and awareness of Canadian Aboriginal Literature.

	Yes	No
Do you understand that you have been asked to participate in a research study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read the information above, and has the researcher answered all your questions about the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in participating in this study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and that any data collected before withdrawal will be destroyed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that your words may be quoted in the thesis document and exhibition?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that your name may also be used in association with your words?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you permit the researcher to use your words and your name in the thesis document and exhibition?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant (Please print)

Date

Signature of Participant

Name of Researcher (Please print)

Date

Signature of Researcher

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Arts, Science, Law Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact Dr. Lynn Penrod, Chair at (780) 492-1199.

INTERVIEWS

Student Information Letter / Consent Form

Study Information

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted for my Master of Design thesis. The purpose of this research project is to gain insight into how Visual Communication Design can enrich students' appreciation of Aboriginal Canadian Literature. This research is being conducted by Andrea Ruskin, MDes candidate, Department of Art and Design, Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be interviewed for approximately one hour. This interview will be recorded. If you consent your words may be quoted in a thesis document and exhibition. The researcher and research assistants associated with this project will comply with the *University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants*. Data recorded in the course of this research will be available only to myself and the assistants, who have signed confidentiality agreements.

There are no known risks involved in participation in this study. By participating in this study you will be helping to develop a resource that could enrich students' appreciation of Canadian Aboriginal Literature.

	Yes	No
Do you understand that you have been asked to participate in a research study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read the information above, and has the researcher answered all your questions about the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in participating in this study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and that any data collected before withdrawal will be destroyed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that your words may be quoted in the thesis document and exhibition?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that your name, identity will not be used in association with your words?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you permit the researcher to use your words in the thesis document and exhibition?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant (Please print)

Date

Signature of Participant

Name of Researcher (Please print)

Date

Signature of Researcher

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Arts, Science, Law Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact Dr. Lynn Penrod, Chair at (780) 492-1199.

INTERVIEWS

Instructor and Content Expert Interview Questions

1. How long have you taught *English 114: Aboriginal Literature and Culture*?
2. How long have you been teaching Aboriginal literature at the post-secondary level?
3. Have you taught similar courses at other institutions? What was your experience with those courses?
4. What should students learn from this course?
 - Which skills would you like students to develop from the course?
 - Which issues do you think are important to communicate to students?
5. What activities do you think it is important for students to be able to do with a digital learning resource? (Assignments, collaborative work with other students.)
6. What is it like for you to teach *English 114*?
 - What are challenges you face as an instructor in the course? Explain.
7. Do you see any advantages to students being able to access support materials like sound files, images and video independently outside of class time?
8. What role do images play in the delivery of the course material? Do you think that using images to communicate course content is important?
9. How do you think an extra resource containing the readings and support materials would impact the class? Explain.
10. Do you think a digital resource might be helpful for students that are shy or reluctant to speak in class?
11. What would be the most important features to include in a resource created for this course?
12. What do students find most challenging about the course? Why?
13. What engages the students with the readings most? Why?
 - What aspects of the literature appeals to students?
14. How do you teach oral literature? How do you teach traditional literature?
15. There a broad range of work presented in the course material, with that in mind, what kind of tone do you think this resource should convey?
16. Do you imagine it having a particular kind of visual look? For example, certain kinds of images, colours etc.
17. Are there any visual examples (print materials, digital materials etc.) you can describe that you think treat Aboriginal materials with cultural sensitivity? Explain.
18. Can you describe for me one or two visual examples that you have encountered that deal with Aboriginal culture that had a strong impact on you? (This impact could be negative or positive.)
19. In your experience, how comfortable are students talking about their traditional knowledge?
20. Are there any symbols, or images that you can think of that could be seen as common to different Aboriginal cultures that you think are important to include?
21. Are there any other comments that you would like to make?

Thank you again for participating in this study.
Your input is appreciated and very valuable.

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEWS CONT'D

INTERVIEWS

Student Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study today. I am going to ask you some questions about your computer use and your experience in *English 114: Aboriginal Literature and Culture*. Before I begin, I would like to make sure you understand that I am not testing your understanding of any of the course materials, I am interested in finding out what taking this course has been like for you.

1. What is your age:
☐ 18-24 ☐ 24- 35 ☐ 35-45 ☐ 45 and up
3. How would you rate your computer experience?
☐ Advanced ☐ Intermediate ☐ Beginner ☐ Other: Explain
4. If you use computers, what do you use computers for most often?
For example, E-mail, instant messaging, world wide web surfing, games, word processing, forums/blogs.
5. With what connection speed do you access the internet?
☐ Dial up ☐ High speed ☐ Wireless ☐ None
6. Where do you access the internet most?
☐ Home ☐ School library ☐ School computer lab ☐ Other: Explain
7. If a student was shy about participating in class do you think a computer resource might be beneficial for them? Why or why not?
8. Which authors/readings did you enjoy most? Why?
9. What features and functions do you think are important to include in the learning resource?
 - a) Would you like to complete assignments on the learning resource?
Why or Why not?
 - b) What form of communication would you like to see in the learning resource?
For example, E-mail, forum, blog etc.
 - c) Would you like to see images or maps on the resource? Why or Why not?
 - d) Would you like to see resources on essay writing? Why or why not?
 - e) Would you like to takes notes using the resource? Why or why not?
· What would you do with those notes after using the resource?
10. Do you think that students connect their own personal experiences with the content of the readings in the course?
11. In your experience, can you comment on how comfortable you think students are when discussing their traditional knowledge?
12. Do you think that students' understanding of traditional knowledge has affected their experience of the course?
13. Some people think that the way a course is taught should match students' learning styles and cultural backgrounds. What do you think of this?
14. There are very different authors included in the resource, do you think that each author should be presented with a different visual look, or do you think that the whole resource should have a similar look?

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEWS CONT'D

INTERVIEWS

Student Interview Questions

15. In designing this resource for students, one of the key aims is to make the design culturally appropriate for the content. What kinds of images should be included, or what kind of look do you think it should have, to achieve this goal?
16. Are there any particular colours that you think should be used in the resource?
17. Would you like to see some Aboriginal languages included in the resource?
18. If a text has images associated with it, would you like to see those images presented with the text, or separate from the text?
19. Are there some images that you have seen used to represent Aboriginal culture that you think are over-used or cliché?
20. Are there any symbols, or images that you can think of that could be seen as common to different Aboriginal cultures?
21. If you were to imagine this resource, designed for you, what would you like to see included in it? How would you like it to look?
22. Are there any other comments you would like to make?

Thank you again for participating in this study.
Your input is appreciated and very valuable.

Web Sites Surveyed

- *Aboriginal Canada Portal*,
<http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca>
- *Aboriginal Learning Centre*,
<http://www.aboriginallearningcentre.ecsd.net/main.htm>
- *Aboriginal Multi-media Society*,
http://www.ammsa.com/dsp_login.asp
- *Aboriginal Youth Network*,
<http://www.ayn.ca/AYNHome.aspx>
- *American Indian Resource Directory*,
<http://www.indians.org/Resource/resource.html>
- *Athabasca University*,
<http://www.athabascau.ca/indigenous/>
- *Assembly of First Nations*,
<http://www.afn.ca/>
- *Banff Centre Aboriginal Arts Program*,
http://www.banffcentre.ca/aboriginal_arts/culture/main/Default.htm
- *Canada's Digital Collections*,
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/E/view.html>
- *Canadian Aboriginal Science & Technology Society*,
<http://www.casts.ca/>
- *Circle of Stories*, Public Broadcasting Corporation,
<http://www.pbs.org/circleofstories/>
- *Congress of Aboriginal Peoples*,
<http://www.abo-peoples.org/>
- *Cradleboard Teaching Project*,
<http://www.cradleboard.org/>
- *First Nations House*, University of Toronto,
<http://www.fnh.utoronto.ca/abs.html>
- *First Peoples on Schoolnet*,
http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/e/main_e.asp
- *Institute of American Indian Arts*,
<http://www.iaiancad.org/college/library-research.php>
- *Hanksville, Storytellers: Native American Authors Online*,
<http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers>

APPENDIX C – WEB SITE EVALUATIONS CONT'D

- *Keyanaw eTutor*, University of Saskatchewan
<http://www.etutor.usask.ca/researchessay.html>
- *Native Online – Resource Centre for Art*,
<http://www.nativeonline.com/>
- *Living Traditions, Indigenous Games*, Virtual Museum of Canada,
<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Traditions/index.html>
- *National Museum of the American Indian*,
<http://www.americanindian.si.edu/>
- *Native American Family Technology Journey*,
<http://firstpeoplesnet.net/>
- *Oyate Organization*,
<http://www.oyate.org/>
- *Say Magazine*,
<http://www.saymag.com/>
- *Spirit Magazine*,
<http://www.spiritmag.ca/Spirit/Connection/connection.html>
- *Thunderbird Design Group*,
<http://www.thethunderbirdgroup.com>
- *Tiro Type Works*, (Syllabic fonts)
<http://www.tiro.com/syllabics/index.html>
- *Jabim Project*, Gingolx BC, Canada's Digital Collections,
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/gingolx/>

Techniques for Evaluating American Indian Web Sites,

Elaine Cubbins, <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~ecubbins/webcrit.html>

Updated 25 July 2000

The World Wide Web as part of the Internet reflects United States culture. One can find almost anything on the Web that one can find offline in the “real” world.

American Indian peoples live in the real world, and Web sites by and about Indian peoples live on the Web. Just as Indians are sometimes treated fairly in the real world, the Web contains sites that show Indians in respectful ways with accurate information, quality products to sell, and as whole human beings with real lives. Just as Indian peoples are sometimes treated wrongly in the real world, the Web also contains sites that use inaccurate and damaging “information”, and portray Native peoples as either less or more than human, or as products to be exploited and sold in some fashion (especially Native spirituality).

The purpose of this Web page is to provide some guidelines useful for evaluating and identifying Web sites that contain accurate information and that are not exploitative of American Indians. Note that these guidelines are not all inclusive nor are they foolproof. Web site evaluation must also include the knowledge that one already has about Native peoples and brings to the Web. If you don't know if a site is presenting accurate information, find a source that you trust, online or offline, and compare what you find there with what you find in the Web site.

Being on the Web is usually a solitary activity so that often you must rely on your own judgment to discern accurate and respectful Web sites about Native peoples. There is no one American Indian culture or people, so what is correct for one tribe or nation is not automatically correct for another tribe or nation. Be careful what you believe to be true. Ask questions.

General Web Site Guidelines

Is the site so sophisticated that to access it requires computer software and hardware that are state-of-the-art?

Continuous development in computers means that to access many of the bells and whistles found on Web sites, one must also continuously upgrade to hardware and software with those capabilities. Many Indian people can't access certain sites because they can't afford to constantly upgrade their computer resources. A site with the latest Web software features may indicate that the site is aimed toward people who have the financial resources to use expensive computers. This doesn't automatically mean that the site is exploitative or incorrect in some way, but that it excludes from its audience individuals with older computers. While at a Web site that dazzles the eye and ear, carefully evaluate its intent and the content, especially if the site is trying to sell something or to convince you of a certain position.

Is the site well-organized and easy to move around in? Does it take a long time for the site to load onto your computer?

Web pages are publications for the public. For someone to be able to understand and easily access its content, the publication must be designed so that the information seeker can move within a page, or from page to page, without getting lost or having to click again and again through layers of links to get

to the substantive information. Per minute online charges, slow modems or insufficient memory, and limited time to spend on the Web are all valid reasons to evaluate a site for ease of use, and to determine whether the site is worth coming to again, or even worth continuing to try to access a first time.

Is the site kept up-to-date, with current links, new material added from time to time, and a creation or revision date?

Links that are not “broken,” new material that is added to a site on a regular basis, and a revision date that is fairly recent indicates a living site that is nurtured and grows. This is not an indication of the accuracy or non-exploitative nature of a Web site, but it shows that the WebBuilder takes pride in working on the site to be usable, current, and a place for the information seeker to return. URLs change all the time so an occasional broken link is forgivable; but many broken links show site neglect, and perhaps for its content too. Some sites don’t require updating so these guidelines may not apply to them.

Is the purpose of the site clear? Does the stated purpose match the actual content?

A site that states its purpose in the introduction or the title gives you immediate information about the content. If the site follows its declared intent, a straightforward and coherent relationship exists between the WebBuilder and the reader. This helps to create the site’s credibility. Keep the intent in mind as you read through the site to help identify possible hidden or more obvious agendas. If a site tells you nothing at all about why it exists, closely examine it before accepting the information it presents.

What links are included to other sites? How well do these links meet criteria for quality Web sites?

It is impossible for WebBuilders to pick and choose who links to their sites. The Web is a network of interactive documents where people usually make reference to one another’s sites by linking to them. Just as print authors are unable to monitor who cites them in journal articles, books, and other printed works, Web authors cannot monitor who links to them. This is even more uncontrollable on the Web because of its organic and growing nature. Each linked site should be evaluated on its own merit, not automatically assumed to be accurate and respectful (or otherwise) because of who is linking to it.

A WebBuilder does control what links to include in a site. Evaluation of a site also means evaluating the links that the WebBuilder chooses to include. Links are part of the site’s total content, and links to respectful and accurate Web sites are important to maintaining quality; however, a quality link may not benefit an otherwise disrespectful or inaccurate Web site beyond being merely a good link, and links to disrespectful or inaccurate sites are like citations to questionable printed material, reflecting poorly on the WebBuilder’s choice of links.

Authority Guidelines

Who is the WebBuilder for the site? Is an email address included?

A Web site is a publication. Just as one would want to know about the author of a book, knowing about the author of a Web site is also useful to determine whether a site is reliable. An email address provides a way to contact the WebBuilder and is an identifier for that person.

A WebBuilder who self-identifies acknowledges accountability for a site. This doesn’t automatically grant credibility, but it does mean the WebBuilder stands by the work. Web sites do exist that are accurate and non-exploitative of Native peoples without the WebBuilder being revealed. This guideline is to be used along with others for an overall evaluation of the site.

Does the site's URL give you any information as to the authority and validity of the site?

A server that is owned by a tribe usually has Web pages about that tribe. For instance, the Oneida Indian Nation Web site lives on a server owned by the nation: <http://oneida-nation.net/>

Some domain names include “.nsn.us” in the server name, which indicates the server belongs to a Native sovereign nation (nsn) that is federally recognized (us); however, not all federally recognized tribes that own their servers (particularly those that have had their domain names for some time) will include this identifier in the server name, as is shown above with the Oneida's Web site. Also, since not all legitimate Indian tribes are recognized by the federal government, their server names will not contain “.nsn.us.”

A Web page that is a personal page should be closely examined. This is evident in the URL by a “~” (tilde) before a login name, and is often on a server with .edu (server of an academic institution) or .com (commercial server that charges for people to put Web sites up) in the URL. Look at the URL for this page and notice the ~ecubbins and the .edu indicating that this is part of a personal Web site at an academic institution.

If the site claims to represent a tribe or a tribal view, is there information supporting the claim that it is an “official” or authorized Web site for the tribe?

Welcoming statements by tribal leaders, links to information about services for tribal members, and claims of the official nature of a site are possible clues, but are not conclusive evidence to identifying a tribe's official site. When in doubt, find out from a reliable source: call, write or email the tribe and ask. A good indication is if a server is owned by the tribe, but tribes do not always own the server where their official Web sites are located. For an example of this, see the tribal web site for the Miami Nation at <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/7156/>

If a site claims to speak for a tribe, check with that tribe to verify the site's authority before believing that it actually does represent tribal consensus.

If the site builder self-identifies as Indian, is tribal affiliation identified? Is the word used to identify the tribe accurate?

It is very easy for people to misrepresent themselves on the Web, and “playing Indian” is unfortunately common. For example, a person who identifies only as “Native American” or “American Indian” leaves much open to question since most Native peoples identify themselves in connection to a particular tribe rather than under general terminology.

Tribal identification is often very specific. For example, rather than identifying simply under the “catch-all” name of Sioux, people who are generalized under this tribal affiliation often are more specific about Sioux identity (i.e., Rosebud Sioux, Oglala Sioux), or self-identify as being Dakota, Lakota, or Nakota, and usually even more specifically within each of these tribal groups. Language, post-contact history, and culture are similar but not identical for these tribes, and although they identify closely with each other, each is unique. The word Sioux comes from a mispronunciation by French traders of an Anishinaabeg word nadonesiouweweg meaning “people who act like snakes”. The Anishinaabeg and the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota were traditional enemies.

Content Guidelines

Is the site marketing something, persuading or informing you of something, providing information, or introducing something personal about the WebBuilder?

Any of these purposes may be legitimate, or perhaps not. The key is to know what the intent of the site is at the beginning so that its content and the direction you will be taken are out in the open for you to judge the site for yourself.

Is the content for the site presented from the Native or the non-Native point of view?

The Native point of view attempts to present information from an insider's point of view. The non-Native point of view attempts to present information from an outsider's point of view. Both may be reliable, but only an Indian person knows what it is like to be Indian. Non-Native people cannot experience what it is like to be Native, although they may offer information about Native peoples that is both accurate and respectful.

Indian people may be primary sources about their own tribes and certainly are about their own experiences of being Indian. Non-Indian people are secondary sources about Indian people and tribes, although they are primary sources about their own non-Indian experiences.

How does one verify that someone who claims to be Native on the Web is in reality Native?

This is crucial when deciding whether to believe the Native view of a particular Web site. When in doubt, go to other sources you trust and ask. The Web is really a small place, and the offline identity of many people who are claiming Native identity is known in the Indian community.

Are the images and icons used on the site accurate and respectful or neutral, or are they inaccurate and caricatures or disrespectful in other ways? If photographs are used, has permission to use them been given? Images are powerful messengers in any medium. The Web has uncountable images of Native peoples as buttons, artwork, photographs, backgrounds, horizontal and vertical bars, and more. Many are respectful, but many are not.

Examples of disrespectful images are Chief Wahoo and knockoffs, animals dressed up "like Indians", the last-of-his-race types of images, stereotypes of material culture that are inaccurate pertaining to the text, photographs of people (especially of children) that are being used without permission.

Examples of respectful images include accurate representations of material culture pertaining to the text, photographs used with permission, and artwork showing Indians as whole people with real life concerns, no matter what era is being depicted.

Is the text written in monosyllables as Tonto would speak, or is it in the "noble savage" speak?

An example of Tonto speak: "Me go to town, findum Sheriff." Incorrect grammar, no articles, short choppy sentences.

An example of noble savage speak excerpted from *The Last of the Mohicans*: "...why do my daughters weep? that a young man has gone to the happy hunting-grounds; that a chief has filled his time with honor? He was good; he was dutiful; he was brave...I am a blazed pine, in a clearing of the pale faces. My race has gone from the shores of the salt lake and the hills of the Delawares. But who can say that the serpent of his tribe has forgotten his wisdom? I am alone --"

A site that speaks to the readers in Tonto or Noble Savage speak is disrespectful, promotes stereotypes about Native peoples, and contains erroneous content.

If stories or poetic words are provided, does the site tell you where they come from? Are they appropriate for the general viewing public on the Web?

The oral traditions of Native people are thousands of years old, and alive and flourishing today. Stories that are told and songs that are sung are integral elements of Native cultures, having meaning within the context of those cultures, and perhaps meant for only certain people within the culture.

Poems are beautiful to read, but many poems that pass for traditional Indian poetry are actually verses of songs taken from a larger work, a work that is to be sung only by a certain person or persons, and at a certain time for a certain purpose. These verses should not be publicized on the Web. This is disrespectful and exploits the Indian people whose song it is.

Almost everyone likes a story and can learn from it, but there are incorrect versions of tribal stories circulating on the Web and in print; also, errors in details give inaccurate information about Indian people. A story is an effective teaching tool only if the teacher and the learner both understand how the story applies to the lesson. Often Native stories refer to certain people or a geographical region where something happened so that the meaning is tied with a personal acquaintance of people and place. Some stories should be told only at specific times of the year, or by certain people to a particular audience, or in a particular language.

Knowing a story or poem's tribal affiliation is essential to verify authenticity and to determine whether the story is one that should be available for public viewing. This is also true for poetry. Using books for verification is problematic because many "respected" books contain stories that are inaccurate and poems that should not be printed. The best way to find out if a site contains work that is both accurate and respectful is to ask members of the tribe given credit for the work.

Is the content accurate (e.g., Indian people, no matter what tribal group, incorrectly depicted as living in tipis)?

There are over 500 American Indian tribes in the United States, from different geographical locations, with different histories, cultures, languages, and relationships to each other, and to state and federal governments. Although some tribes may be closely related to each other, there is no Pan-Indian way. Even related tribes vary in significant ways. Small details pertaining to dress, housing or other material culture are good clues about evaluating a Web site. Good sites will acknowledge the complex diversity of American Indians and present accurate information clearly while avoiding simplification.

If the site is trying to sell something, does the seller tell you about how the item was acquired or created? Does the seller try to make you feel that you are buying into the "mysterious powers" of American Indians if you buy the product?

It is illegal to sell items claiming to be made by American Indian people unless it is true, to sell human remains or artifacts associated with Native burials, and to sell items obtained through illegal means (e.g., theft or fraud). Unfortunately, all this happens all the time in relation to Native peoples.

It is disrespectful to sell items portraying Native people in photographs without their consent, or selling items in connection with an Indian person's name without consent, but both these things happen all the time.

Before you buy something over the Web claiming to be "authentically" American Indian made, verify that it is, that it is legally obtained, and that it does not exploit Indian people. If the seller tries to mar-

ket “the mystical powers” of Indians with the product, and the “powers” can also be yours if you plunk down your money, beware! No non-Native person can experience being Indian through the purchase and possession of a thing or an experience.

Are sacred objects, ways, knowledge, or other forms of Native spirituality being offered for sale?

It is ethically wrong, and in some cases illegal, to sell Native spirituality, either by Native or non-Native people. Unfortunately this is big business on and off the Web, and a site that does this exploits American Indian peoples. Native or non-Native persons may also “peddle” Native spirituality for free, but the payback to them is self-aggrandizement, to make themselves appear more “Indian”, to gather followers, to pretend they have something others don’t, to gain power in some way. This is wrong, and sometimes dangerous. Injuries and death have occurred to some of those seeking an “authentic Indian spiritual experience” from unscrupulous people. Protect yourself and protect Native spirituality. Don’t buy it with money or with the “worship” for someone who is exploiting spirituality to gain power in some way.

Is there anything about the content or presentation that makes you feel uncomfortable?

If a site is questionable, ask knowledgeable people to evaluate it, notify tribes about sites to find out their opinions, and check reliable print and nonprint sources (if possible) for verification.

If your verification source gives approval, but you still don’t feel comfortable about the site, then let it go.

All errors belong to the author.

Please email your comments and questions regarding this site to Elaine Cubbins, MA-IRLS at ecubbins@u.arizona.edu

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Print distribution for educational purposes is encouraged.

Please contact me first so I can track usage of this document.

Thank you for your cooperation

Web Site Evaluation Template

Purpose

Audience

Technical Assessment

- Download time
- Platforms
- Plug ins
- Resolution
- Summary

Functionality

- Structure
- Navigation
- User Tasks

Content Assessment

- Language use and content
- Hierarchy and Organization

Visual Assessment

- Image use – placement, quantity, quality, type
- Text style – placement, font, quantity quality
- Media use/placement of media
- Colour
- Summary

Credibility

- URL evaluation
- Contact person
- Site creator background
- Last update
- Resource links included
- Affiliation with institution
- Point of View

Cultural Representation

- Context
- Visuals
- Language
- Summary

Evaluation – Keyanaw Etutor

Accessed: August 10, 2005
<http://www.etutor.usask.ca/>

Purpose

The purpose of the site is to provide web-based, out of class support, to Aboriginal undergraduate students at the University of Saskatchewan. Links are provided for students to search by subject. (<http://www.etutor.usask.ca/>) Students are not provided with assistance for specific coursework or access to libraries through the resource. The site was created by University of Saskatchewan researchers and is currently in a testing phase. Feedback from students is being gathered and a paper will be written on the outcome within the year. (<http://www.etutor.usask.ca/about.html>)

Audience

The audience for this website is Aboriginal undergraduate students at the University of Saskatchewan.

Technical Assessment

Download time

The site loads quickly on a high speed connection and performs well on a dial-up connection. Because few images are used download time is minimal.

Platforms

The site functions and looks the same on:
Mac – Safari, Internet Explorer and Firefox
Windows – Internet Explorer and Firefox

Plug ins

No plug ins are required to view the site.

Resolution

The site has been designed to fit an 800 x 600 screen.

Structure

The site is broken up into two distinct sections by two different navigational menus: a main menu with four subject headings and a jump menu with 28 subject listings. The first section, accessed by four main menu buttons is divided into four sections: information about the purpose of the site, an explanation of use of the jump menu, a feedback form and an about page that includes contact information. The pages that contain resource links are not well organized. For example, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry page is not organized alphabetically or by topic. The “About” page contains more information about the research project than the site which could be confusing for users.

Navigation

The main navigation menu uses rollovers and a highlight colour indicates which page users are on. The navigation for this section of the site follows Nielson's basic usability principle of affordance (Nielson 2000). Since there are only four links provided in this section the omission of visual cues for visited links seems unimportant. The jump menu poses more problems when basic usability principles are considered. A jump menu provides no opportunity to indicate visually to the user which item they are selecting, which items they have already selected or which page they are on. As a result, the menu does not support Nielson's principles of user affordance (Nielson 2000). There are also 28 items in this menu that are not visible to the user at all times. The user has to remember each item, or continuously click on the jump menu to see the selections. Dividing the 28 sections into categories that the user could select from, might provide an easier method for navigation.

User Tasks

Users can submit a feedback form, contact site researchers or link to external sites. The site relies heavily on links to external sources; it might be a benefit to have some method for students to compile or collect the information they need through the *Keyanaw* site instead of having so many external links.

Summary

Although the navigation is not difficult to follow, a jump menu with so many items poses basic usability problems. A re-organization of the site structure could remedy this problem and eliminate the necessity for a jump menu. The use of a full page to explain how the jump menu navigation works, also seems unnecessary.

Content Assessment

Language use and content

The user is addressed directly and all sentences are simple, direct and concise. There is not much actual content on the site; subject pages list links to other sites with brief descriptions of the listed resource. Grouping resources according to potential research categories might have been a more efficient way to present the content. Without knowing more about the audience it is difficult to judge whether the language use is overly simple.

Hierarchy and Organization

As stated earlier the organization of the site content needs refinement. Because of the lack of organization the hierarchy on resource pages becomes unclear. The two menus are placed at the top of the page above the content and are different enough visually to establish a clear hierarchy between the menus and content. A university slogan placed in the right hand column of the three column content section disrupts the visual hierarchy. The slogan has been executed in bold text and is significantly larger than the content headings. The size and bold weight of the type make this image one of the most visually dominant elements on the page. The rationale for the division

of content into three columns is unclear. The left and right columns are narrow and have been created to hold images. Since the images seem to be primarily decorative, the need for these columns is not totally clear.

Summary

While the content selected for students may be relevant, the organization and hierarchy obstruct student access to information. Visual hierarchies are fairly clear and consistent in both the navigation and the text. More division of content into sub-categories would make searching easier for students. A search feature might also benefit students.

Visual Assessment

Image use

The top area of the page is made up of two black horizontal bands, and an abstract image. The image could be reminiscent of sun rays. Two background images are used in this top section of the site. One employs some layering of photographic images which seem to suggest some kind of plant-like imagery. Images used in the content section don't change to suit page content. They seem to be placed purely to fill visual space on the page and look as if they might be purchased stock photographs. There is an image of hands typing on a keyboard. (An overused, cliché image.) and an image of students. The image of the students is so small that it is difficult to get any kind of impression from this image. It is difficult to tell what the students are doing because the image is so small, but it appears that they seem to be watching something out of the frame. Aside from the fact that these students seem to fit the target audience it is difficult to see any relevance to the content of the site. Maple leaves are used to mark Canadian sources. Visually, these images don't seem to match the rest of the site aesthetic, which is clean and minimal. They are also larger than they need to be and further disrupt the visual hierarchy of the site.

Text style

The use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) style sheets for headings, sub-headings, links and body text make the text hierarchy clear and consistent. Visual hierarchy of headings, sub-headings and body text is established through the use of type style, vertical space, and type size. All headings are in all caps and use a serif font, while sub-headings use a bold weight, sans-serif face. Body text is sans serif text of the same font as sub-headings but in a normal font weight. The leading for the site should be increased to make reading more comfortable. Bullets in lists are overly large and lack of space between bulleted items, along with negative leading, make the reading of lists difficult. (See <http://www.etutor.usask.ca/navigation.html>) Links are indicated by underline and an orange text colour. The contrast of the orange text and white background should pose no problems for users with normal vision; however, it may be difficult for those with vision impairment. Body text is dark grey with enough contrast for readers with or without vision impairment. Table structures stretch and begin to break apart the layout when text is enlarged with the browser. The clear

visual hierarchy established with the text does much to aid in the organization of content for the viewer. However the lack of organization and the number of links provided on the resource page make scanning difficult for the viewer.

Media use/placement of media

No media except images are used in the site.

Colour

Colour is used consistently to indicate links and in all backgrounds throughout the site. The site masthead is made up of warm analogous colours contrasted with black horizontal borders. Saturated reds oranges and yellows make up the abstract photographic images that are used as background for the masthead. This could create many different associations with viewers, for example: sunlight, sunsets, fire, earth, flowers, etc. White is used for text backgrounds and a pale beige tint frames the site as a background area for the browser window. The warmth of the colour does much for the visual appeal of the site. Without the warm colour the site might be too sterile or minimalist.

Summary

A consistent layout, minimalist aesthetic and warm colours make the site's overall visual appearance appealing and inviting; however, the use of images needs improvement. More images relevant to the pages presented or images of students might increase the visual appeal. While the visual hierarchy is consistent and serves to organize content, the lack of refinement of information in the site structure cannot be compensated for by visual hierarchy alone.

Credibility

URL evaluation – <http://www.etutor.usask.ca/>

The “usask” in the url address makes the affiliation with the University of Saskatchewan credible. In order to use “usask” in the url, the site must be hosted on the university server and therefore must have been created by individuals associated with the institution.

Contact person, site creator background

The site was created by researchers from the University of Manitoba and the University of Saskatchewan. Developer credits include: the University of Saskatchewan, University of Manitoba and the Institute for Indigenous Government Vancouver, BC.

Last update

No date is indicated for the last update, although a project timeline indicates that site content is relatively current. A site that provides student resource links should include some indication of the last update to guarantee currency of information for users.

Affiliation with institution or school

The site is affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan and was funded by Human Resources Development Canada, Office of Learning Technologies. The presence of logos from both these organizations on the website lends further credibility.

Point of view

Since the site was written by academics from a reputable institution and was created in cooperation with established Aboriginal institutions, the content could be presumed to be reliable. A thorough description of the project and working email links to the creators also helps to establish credibility.

Summary

Credibility of materials provided on the internet is difficult to prove; however, one of the most reliable associations a website like this can have is an affiliation with a well known university. Whether or not the links provided are appropriate for students will most likely be resolved during this testing phase of the site.

Cultural Representation

Context

The site is meant to provide information about academic subjects and university services to students and is not intended as a site to provide information only about Aboriginal issues. It might however be useful to provide links for students to specific Aboriginal student support services at the university, such as, a link to the university's elder counseling program.

Visuals

The minimalist appearance and layout of the site give it a contemporary feel. The main image in the masthead is abstract and therefore could be seen as appropriate in many other contexts and is not culturally specific. As discussed above, some associations with the natural world may arise from the colour use in the masthead image, which could be relevant for Aboriginal students since many Aboriginal cultures have a strong connection to the natural world that is critical to their worldview (Booth 2003).

Language

The masthead at the top of the homepage shows the word "welcome" in five Aboriginal languages and English. Aside from the title of the site, there is no other content presented in other languages. It might be beneficial to include Aboriginal translations for students.

Summary

While the site does not represent Aboriginal culture specifically through visual appearance, it presents a successful mix of a casual and a formal aesthetic. The mix of casual and formal are suitable to an academic website but is also inviting to students. It might be more inviting if more images of Aboriginal students were shown. A balance between the university culture and Aboriginal culture is fairly well established; although it might be more meaningful to users if their culture were represented more visually.

References

- Nielson, Jakob, (2000) *Designing Web Usability*, Indianapolis, Indiana: New Riders Publishing.
- Selin, H., & Kalland, A. (2003). *Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Circle of Stories

www.pbs.org/circleofstories/

Purpose of Site

The site appears to exist primarily as an educational resource for students and teachers. Lesson plans for teachers are included in the site. The purpose of the site as stated on the homepage is to: "...use documentary film, photography, artwork and music to honor and explore Native American storytelling." ("Circle of Stories" 2002–2004, ¶1)

Audience

The lesson plans provided are intended for teachers and their students in grades 6–12, so one can assume that this is the target audience for the site.

Technical Assessment

Download time

The site loads quickly with a high-speed connection. The *Flash* portion of the site may load more slowly with a dial up connection.

Platforms

The resource worked on both Mac and Windows platforms. The *Flash* portion seemed to play slightly faster on Mac Firefox than on Safari or internet explorer.

Browsers tested:

Mac – Safari, Firefox, Internet Explorer

Windows – Firefox, Internet Explorer

Plug-ins

Flash player is required to view the storytelling section and the galleries.

Resolution The site is designed to fit a minimum monitor size of 800 x 600 pixels.

The site has been created with a fixed width table and therefore does not change scale in proportion to the browser window.

Structure

The site is divided into five sections that include information on: the four storytellers, their stories, information for educators, community involvement, external links to

Native American websites, contact information, a storytelling gallery, a culture gallery, the history of storytelling and current Native American land and language issues. The stories can be viewed either by playing the *Flash* file or using the “storytellers” link to view them in a text version. Although the structure of the site is fairly clear, poor labeling could create confusion for the user. For example, one would expect biographical information when selecting links labeled for each storyteller, however, these pages provide information on the storyteller, their tribe, and a text version of their story. There is far too much text on one page, which requires a great deal of scrolling for the user.

Unfortunately the storytelling gallery and the culture gallery can be easily missed because of their placement on pages containing other content. They seem to hold important enough information that there should be separate pages for the galleries. In their current placement they seem to be an afterthought to the site. Content from the galleries require *Flash* player.

Navigation

Global navigation for the PBS site is located at the top of the page and consists of seven menu items. The majority of menus are presented as a horizontal bar although some sub-menus are presented in a vertical format on the left of the page. Five menu items make up the sub-navigation menu bar for the *Circle of Stories* micro-site:

- Storytellers
- Many Voices
- We are here
- Community
- For Educators

The sub-navigation items are repeated again below this menu bar with text descriptions. Since the redundant navigation relies on text made from images it is unclear as to the reasons for the repetition. It is most likely because the labeling of the menu items needs clarification for the user. The potential problem with these vague labels is that even after the user has read a description they will most likely forget it when they have navigated to another page. Most text links are clearly indicated by underlining. Other redundancies in menus exist on the “community” and “for educators” pages.

Stories

The navigation for the *Flash* version of the stories is structured around a circular spiral symbol. The circular spiral symbol also incorporates the four directions. The user has to click on one of the four directions to select a story. The stories section opens up a separate window when the symbol is clicked on from the homepage. When viewing a story the user can use buttons to pause, rewind and fast forward the story. The symbol of the four directions is present and is used here as a back button. (However there is no visual cue to indicate that it is now functioning as a back button.) A button to select the “next story” is also available.

Galleries

Unlike the stories link the galleries don't open in a separate window. Using horizontal scroll buttons the user navigates through a mosaic of images each with its own caption. When an image is selected a poem, statement or story appears in the window. Back buttons return the user to the collection of images. Navigation for this section is fairly clear, buttons labeled with arrows make the scrolling function clear to the user. The scrolling functions at an appropriate speed.

User Tasks

- View video files
- Listen to sound files
- View still images
- View lesson plans
- Submit comments via blog
- Submit personal story via email

Summary

There is unnecessary repetition for some menu items. The labeling of menu items is vague and requires explanation. Clarification is needed to let users know that they have the option to listen to the storytellers or to read the stories without having to view the *Flash* file. The navigation of the site becomes less clear when viewing the *Flash* version of the stories because the use of the symbol as a navigational element is not executed consistently. All menus are placed consistently throughout the site. Technically the site is sound. The look is consistent on all platforms and the functionality is the same on all platforms. The animation of images in the storytelling section is a bit slow and laboured looking on all platforms even when using a computer with a high processor speed.

Content Assessment

Language use and content

The language use is often informal for the stories. Language in the sections "We Are Here" and "For Educators" is more formal. Aside from the stories themselves, the site is not written from the point of view of Aboriginal people. The content of the four stories is a mix of older traditional stories and contemporary personal stories.

Hierarchy and Organization

All headings and sub-headings are consistently labeled. The PBS global menu is positioned above the *Circle of Stories* menu and is visually different enough that it becomes the most dominant menu on the page. The PBS menu is the most visually dominant item on the page because it is above the other menus and is also the darkest and largest of the menus. Some pages appear to be text heavy, although separate sections are clearly divided with vertical space and rules.

Summary

The language use seems appropriate for the target age group and the mix of contemporary and traditional stories contributes to a more comprehensive view of Aboriginal cultures.

Visual Assessment

Image use (placement, quantity, quality, type)

All images are photographs. Some are full colour and some are duotones that use greens or browns. Images for the *Flash* animation include a portrait of the storyteller, a map showing where the storyteller's tribe is from, as well as landscapes and animal photographs from the area in which the storyteller lives. The maps are the only illustrations shown. A circular symbol on the main page is incorporated as a background and as a dividing structure for images used in the *Flash* animation.

Text style (placement, font, quantity quality)

All body text is sans serif (Arial or Helvetica); a casual script font is used for major headings and a serif text (times new roman) is used for sub-headings. All body text is set rag right. When there are vertical sub-menus on the left of the page they are rag right and in all caps. All caps is used for major headings, while a mixed case is used for sub-menus. Text in the html version stands up to font enlargement using the browser settings. Text columns do not break the table structure when enlarged.

Media use/placement of media

Media includes: Real Player audio files, *Flash* files and photography.

Colour

Muted earth tones primarily brown and green with dark red accent colours are used. Text is both black and white. Different colours are associated with each storyteller. Colour serves to distinguish between each storyteller in the html section and in the *Flash* section.

Summary

Without an expert understanding of Aboriginal imagery and its use in popular media, it is difficult to tell if the circle representing the four directions might be considered cliché by Aboriginal users. It is the most dominant symbol used on the site, while other symbols are tinted and used as backgrounds behind text. Rough edges and textures are applied as borders around pages and images and it would seem that these are meant to reference nature. The use of imagery to convey something about where each storyteller comes from is effective, although the html version of the stories does not show the variety of images that the story section and galleries show. The sans-serif type, the style of the photographs and the arrangement of elements on a clearly defined grid gives the site a contemporary feel. The use of the nature imagery and photographs of traditional items creates an interesting mix of past and present.

Credibility

URL evaluation – www.pbs.org/circleofstories/

The URL is easy to remember because it is short and contains no special characters. The .org in the URL indicates that this is a non-commercial organization, which can lend credibility to the site.

Contact person, Site creator background

A detailed list of credits with links and contact information is included. Links are up to date and there is a list of referenced works included on the credits page.

Last update

There is no date to indicate when the site was last updated; however, the site would appear to have been created recently. (The copyright date is 2002-2004.)

Affiliation with institution or school

The site is affiliated with PBS, ITVS, CPB, Philomath Films, the Cultural Conservancy and Second Story. The homepage contains links for all of the organizations and states that the *Circle of Stories* site is “an Electric Shadows project.”

Point of View

The credits page lists the Cultural Conservancy as consultants in the project. A detailed list of names is included in the credits page. This list shows that several Aboriginal consultants participated in many aspects of the project, including site design. From the credits page one can conclude that the site was created in collaboration or consultation with Aboriginal people even if some of the pages were not written by Aboriginal people.

Summary

PBS is a non-profit, noncommercial media enterprise owned by 349 public television stations. (<http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/>) The affiliation with PBS probably lends the most credibility to the *Circle of Stories* website. A thorough site credits page with working links also lends credibility to the site.

Cultural Representation

Context

The site is meant as an educational tool for teachers and students in grades 6 – 12. A mix of contemporary and traditional life is represented by the four stories. The “We Are Here” page summarizes some issues facing Aboriginal peoples in contemporary society and the “Community” page allows users to add their own stories via email. The site portrays Aboriginal culture both in the past and present and is perhaps even slightly more focused on portraying an understanding of present day life to the user.

Visuals

The site has to represent very different Aboriginal cultures from varied geographic areas. The use of photographs and maps helps to clarify this diversity for the viewer, which can aid in preventing generalizations being made about Aboriginal culture. Change in colour palette for each storyteller also highlights this difference. While there is no way to find out how the execution of the symbol of the four directions has been received by Aboriginal viewers, Willis does make a strong case for its being representative of many Aboriginal cultures: “Even though cultural differences certainly exist between Native American groups, the Four Directions seem to prevail

as a consistent cultural symbol.” (Willis 32) By selecting the symbol of the Four Directions, using macro views of aspects of nature and photographs of the storytellers the site does a good job of visually representing Aboriginal culture in an inclusive and diverse way.

Language

Some Aboriginal languages are represented, but only in audio files of the stories. No text in Aboriginal languages is provided. The “We Are Here” section discusses the loss of Aboriginal languages in North America.

It would seem from the language use that aside from the stories the text does not come from an Aboriginal perspective. Some of the writing could be construed as romanticizing Aboriginal people: “Before the conquest of Native North America, it is estimated that millions of people lived in the arid deserts, stone cold mountains, wandering rivers and mist-covered seashores.” (<http://www.pbs.org/circleofstories/wearehere/index.html>)

Summary

It seems that the representation of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures has been handled quite well. Along with general information about Aboriginal cultures there is information provided in the “storytellers” sections that highlights the diversity within the cultures. Photographs of the natural world also show diversity as well as emphasizing a common connection with nature among Aboriginal cultures. A palette of earth tones also draws this connection to nature. The text and layout are handled in such a way that they refer to the natural world without appearing overly naïve.

References

- Willis, Steve (2005). The Four Directions. *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 24-1, 31-42.
- Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), (n.d.). *Circle of Stories*. Retrieved November 17, 2004, from <http://www.pbs.org/circleofstories/index.html>

Nitsitapiisinni – Our Way of Life

<http://www.glenbow.org/blackfoot>

Purpose of Site

To present Blackfoot history and culture in a virtual museum exhibit. (As Blackfoot people know and understand it, not as it is re-interpreted by non-Blackfoot people). To attempt to document culture and history in a learning environment. The goal: preservation and education.

Audience

According to the creators of the site, it was designed specifically for grades 4-6 (ages 9-11) but they have also included some features and items that would appeal to a broader audience. (Alberta Online Consortium, 2004)

Technical Assessment

Download time

There are two versions: a *Macromedia Flash* and html version. Although the html version contains many images they download fairly quickly on a dial up connection. Some units load slower than others in the *Flash* version, but none of the units take more than 8 seconds to load with a high speed connection. The html version is better suited for dial up speed, while the *Flash* version is better suited for a high speed connection.

Platforms

The resource worked on both Mac and Windows platforms.

Browsers tested:

Mac – Safari, Firefox, Internet Explorer

Windows – Firefox, Internet Explorer

Plug-ins

Flash player required for *Flash* version.

Resolution:

The site is designed to fit a minimum browser size of 800 x 600 pixels.

Summary

Generally the site is technically sound and the look and functionality are consistent on all platforms; however, there are technical difficulties with the *Flash* portion of the site. Technical difficulties tend to occur when too many buttons are pressed at once or in succession. Unfortunately with an audience ranging from 9 to 11 years this may occur quite frequently.

Navigation and Structure

Navigation consists of one main menu and two sub-menus.

The main menu consists of five Blackfoot symbols each of which represent one of the five sections.

Main menu divisions:

- How we lived with the land,
- How we lived with the buffalo,
- How we lived with other people,
- How we lived with our families,

- Our world
- Our Traditional Stories

Sub-navigation menus:

- Blackfoot
- English
- French
- Teacher Toolkit
- About this site
- Text Version (Actually html version)
- Comments
- Home

Flash Version:

Rollovers on each button change the scale of the symbol and add a highlight colour with text to explain the symbol in the *Flash* version. This makes remembering what content is in each section difficult. The html version has text labels for each section that make identifying content easier. The reason for this inconsistency between versions is unclear.

A new window opens when the *Flash* version is selected. Users are taken back to the original window if they click on the sub-menu at the bottom of the screen. There is nothing to indicate that this will happen when you click on the sub-menu. This could confuse or frustrate users. Nielsen states that website navigation should always indicate to the user where they have been, where they are and where they can go. (Nielsen 2000) Without indicating that the sub-menu links will take you to a new window the designers are not giving an accurate description to the user of where they can go.

Placement of the menus in both versions is consistent on every page. Consistency is important in preventing confusion for users because it prevents them from having to speculate as to the meaning of differing navigational items. A highlight colour indicates which page the user is on; however, there is no indicator to show which pages have been visited. According to Nielsen's Heuristics for User Interface Design visibility of system status is critical for users. (Nielsen 2000) If they aren't sure of what links they have visited there is a danger that they end up clicking on the same link several times and become frustrated. Some units force students to continue through each link before they can move on to another part of the same unit, while others end without further direction to the user. This can cause frustration, especially when a user cannot find all of the necessary items they are supposed to click on to finish a unit. In the *Flash* version, navigation is hindered by too many pop-up windows and requires extensive use of the mouse to open and close windows. Audio feedback on menu items is also provided on the *Flash* version, but not on the html version. The repetition of certain sounds could become irritating for some users.

User Tasks

The site includes a game, sound files and images. Users can view and print materials from the teacher toolkit section as well as download pdf files from the instructional units. The site provides a good variety of tasks to keep young users' attention. It seems to provide a good balance of activities that are independent and teacher led activities.

Summary

Overall the navigation is clear and consistent. However, the *Flash* version requires extensive use of the mouse and the number of pop-up windows could cause confusion for beginner users or frustration for returning users. In the *Flash* version the use of symbols in the main menu without text makes it difficult to remember what each link is for. The html version adheres more faithfully to usability conventions. Although the information seems fairly well organized into the five main sections inconsistencies in the navigation confuses the structure.

Content Assessment

Language use and content

All language is written as if the Blackfoot people as a group are speaking directly to non-Blackfoot people. For example: "*In order to understand us you need to understand the world around us.*"

There is a particular concentration on the past, especially emphasized through the consistent use of the past tense. Present tense is used at the beginning of each unit to describe present day activities of the Blackfoot and also used in the "Our World" section of the site. Switching tense is a good way to emphasize the difference in content on the site. As stated earlier, the concentration on the history of the Blackfoot people could potentially lead to inaccurate views of Blackfoot culture. The language is not particularly complex and would be easy for the target audience to understand.

Hierarchy and organization

The site hierarchy is fairly clear. The main menu is visually different from the sub-menus. All text has clear headings and sub-headings and links are clearly indicated by underline or rollover. Some consistency issues exist that muddy the organization. For example in some areas visited links cannot be re-viewed, while in others certain areas can be viewed repeatedly. Lack of indications of visited links makes it difficult for the user to tell when they have completed a section.

All text is chunked into small sections. In the *Flash* version the text is divided into too many small sections. New pieces of information in each section come from a pop-up window. The amount of text in each window rarely exceeds two paragraphs. As a user I was frustrated by having to open and close so many windows. However, users in the target group (9 – 11 year olds) may have a different experience.

Summary

More emphasis is placed on the Blackfoot way of life in the past. Depending on the way the site is used by educators, it could present a skewed vision of Blackfoot

culture, or worse, a view of the culture as something from the past that no longer exists in present day. Information in the *Flash* version seems to be divided into too many small sections that require extensive opening and closing of windows.

Visual Assessment

Image use

In both versions image quality is high. There is a mix of illustrations and photos throughout each section. When discussing present day life, photography is used but when the past is discussed, illustrations and animation are used. Like the change in tense in the writing, this visual distinction between photography and illustration, further emphasizes the separation of past and present in the site structure. Without more material on present day life, it is difficult to say whether these distinctions are a positive or negative feature. The site background is an illustration of a buffalo skin. It would seem that images of fur and animal skins are used throughout the site to emphasize the importance of the buffalo in Blackfoot culture.

Text style

All body text is sans serif (Arial or Helvetica) while a casual script font is used for major headings. All text columns are left aligned. The column width seems a bit narrow for comfortable reading when the browser font size is set at the default. Text in the html version is relatively unchanged when the font size is enlarged by the browser, although the left navigation menu does begin to break apart after about two steps of enlargement. Text in the *Flash* version cannot be enlarged but the size is adequate for comfortable reading. (If the user has no vision impairment.)

Media use/placement of media

Video and audio files are used in both the *Flash* and html versions. Files are labeled clearly indicating to the user what type of file they will be viewing, as well as the size and length of the file.

Colour

All muted Earth tones, primarily browns and blacks are used with highlight colours of highly saturated red and yellow. Highlight colours are used primarily for navigational elements, and are used consistently which provides clear visual cues to the user to indicate clickable elements. The extensive use of brown and black suggests both the buffalo and the topography of Blackfoot territory.

Summary

The mix of photography and illustration blends well in the site. Animation of the illustrated figures adds a playful quality to the site. There appears to be an overuse of the visual metaphor of animal skins on all pages. Text is handled consistently and even the casual script is legible. There is a roughness about the appearance of the site conveyed through textures in such a way that it seems meant to imitate natural elements. Beiges and browns reflect the prairies which is the traditional territory of the Blackfoot. (These colours are also probably reminiscent of the buffalo.) Over used visual elements, like textures and animal skins, make create too much visual clutter to present clear visual hierarchies of information.

Credibility

URL evaluation www.glenbow.org/blackfoot

The URL is easy to remember because it is short and does not contain any special characters. The .org in the URL indicates that this is a non-commercial organization, which lends credibility to the site.

Contact person, site creator background

A detailed list of credits with links and contact information is included. All external links are working.

Last update

There is no date indicated for last update, however, the site copyright is 2005.

Affiliation with institution or school

The Glenbow museum is a reputable museum in Calgary, Alberta. The Virtual Museum of Canada is also a well recognized institution.

Point of View

On the “About this site” page it states that the site is a collaborative project between the Blackfoot people and the Glenbow museum. Credit is given to the individuals from the Blackfoot community for all aspects of their participation. The Point of View is written from the perspective of the Blackfoot people. If this were not a collaborative effort, and was completed by non-Blackfoot individuals the site’s credibility would be seriously questioned.

Summary

The affiliation with the Glenbow museum and the virtual museum of Canada as well as comprehensive list of credits lend the most credibility to the site. In order to learn more about the Glenbow’s relationship with the Blackfoot community more research would be required.

Cultural Representation

Context

The site is meant to inform students about Blackfoot history and culture. However, the context of the site is primarily a historical one. As stated earlier, the majority of site content deals with the history of the Blackfoot people, not their present way of life. This could lead to a skewed understanding of Blackfoot culture if students are not exposed to other resources on current Blackfoot communities.

Visuals

Without a thorough knowledge of Blackfoot culture it is hard to judge the appropriateness of the images. The use of animal skins most likely refers to the large role that the buffalo played in Blackfoot culture. Most illustrations seem to reference the visual style of stone drawings shown in one of the videos. Some illustrations seem to lack cultural sensitivity if compared to guidelines set out by the Oyate organization. “Oyate is a Native organization working to see that our lives and histories are

portrayed honestly, and so that all people will know our stories belong to us. For Native children, it is as important as it has ever been for them to know who they are and what they come from. It is a matter of survival. For all children, it is time to learn the truth of history. Only in this way will they come to have the understanding and respect for each other that now, more than ever, will be necessary for life to continue. (“Oyate Organization,” 1995–2005, ¶1)

For example, in the section on family, an illustration of a family in a tipi is shown with every member of the family having the same face. According to Slapin, Seale and Gonzales (2000) this is called tokenism, which can support stereotyping of Aboriginal peoples. Their faces are stylized and cartoon-like and don't fit the visual style other illustrations on the site.

Language

Language representation appears to be inclusive since the resource is available in English, Blackfoot and French.

Summary

The point of view and tone of the resource does tend to create a separation of “us” versus “them” because of the way the user is addressed. However the “us” referred to here refers to Aboriginal people. There is a concern in the literature that referring to Aboriginal people as “them” conveys a paternalistic patronizing attitude towards Aboriginal people. (Slapin, Seale and Gonzales 2000) Site credits list all names of contributors that are Blackfoot, however there is no indication that they speak for the Blackfoot community in any official capacity. Because the site is associated with two reputable institutions one would assume that the site content was checked for accuracy. What kind of impression students would get from this site without further exposure to contemporary Blackfoot communities? One concern of many Aboriginal communities today is that their society not be seen as a society that only existed in the past. (Slapin, Seale and Gonzales 2000) The traditional stories on the site do not come with any genealogy to explain who is telling them and whether or not permission to tell them has been given by the community. This is a major concern when analyzing credibility.

An additional concern is that the website states that it was created in collaboration with the Blackfoot people, but does not list any official Blackfoot organization. This could mean that the site is only representative of the knowledge and beliefs of a few Blackfoot individuals. However, information can be found that shows cooperation between the Blackfoot Confederation and the Glenbow museum so we may be able to assume that the individuals working on the site were speaking for the Blackfoot community with their permission. To the credit of the site, the teacher toolkit does include additional information about Blackfoot culture and a recommended protocol for teaching students about the culture.

References

- Slapin, B., Seale, D., & Gonzales, R. (2000). *How to Tell the Difference: a Guide to Evaluating Children's Books for Anti-Indian Bias* (Rev. ed.). Berkeley, Calif.: Oyate.
- Alberta Online Consortium. (2004). *Glenbow Museum Blackfoot Web Exhibit and Teacher Toolkit*. Retrieved June 3, 2005, from http://www.ataoc.ca/default.asp?V_DOC_ID=988
- Oyate Organization. (1995–2005). Retrieved January 12, 2004, from <http://www.oyate.org/aboutus.html>

Spirit Magazine

Accessed: August 5, 2005

<http://www.spiritmag.ca/Spirit/index/index.html>

Purpose

The purpose of the site is to promote *Spirit Magazine*. The magazine was created to: "...provide diverse perspectives on Canadian identity and culture through the experiences and expressions of Aboriginal Canadians."

(*Spirit Magazine*, n.d., Community, ¶1)

Audience

The audience for this website is Aboriginal youth and young adults under 35. The "Community" page describes their team as "youth-driven" and the language used is specific to a younger audience. (*Spirit Magazine*, n.d., Community, ¶4)

Technical Assessment

Download time

The download time of the site is quick on a high speed connection. Each page relies on frames for text which reduces download time, but increases the chance of compatibility problems with some web browsers.

Platforms

The site functions and looks the same on:
Mac – Safari, Internet Explorer and Firefox
Windows – Internet Explorer and Firefox

Plug ins

No plug ins are required to view the site.

Resolution

The site has been designed to fit an 800 x 600 screen.

Structure

The site is divided into 6 main sections, with sub-menus in some of the sections. The division of information on the site needs refining. The “Community” page actually contains some information about the creators of the magazine and the “About Spirit” page contains information about events and back issues of the magazine. It is only when you scroll down to the bottom of the page that you find some information about the goals and target audience of the magazine. One last important point about the problems with site navigation is the inclusion of a splash page. Many early sites on the world wide web were designed with splash pages, but usability studies have shown that they are not popular with users. Jakob Neilson has found that “splash screens are annoying to users, and users click off them as soon as they can.” (Neilson 2000)

Navigation

The navigation is fairly consistent for each section with menu and sub-menus positioned in the same place for each page and treated the same visually. Traditional conventions for a contact page are used to label the button “contact,” but for some reason the site creators decided to confuse the issue by labeling the button for the contact page “Connection.” Buttons are clearly labeled with rollovers and change colour to indicate what page the user is on. All other links are indicated using underline. While the user is given good indications of where they are and where they can go on the site, navigation could be hindered by overly small text in both the menus and sub-menus.

User Tasks

Link to external sites listed

Contact magazine via email link

Summary

While the navigation of the site is fairly clear the information structure needs refinement. Vague labels on menu items make it difficult to know what content the page will hold and some content belonging under one heading on one page is spread over two pages under different headings. Technically the site functions well on several different platforms, but the structure and navigation are poor. The use of iFrames to load text into the content window was probably implemented to allow the magazine staff to upload and update site content without a webmaster. However, full html pages are being loaded into a window that is too small to fit the pages; this forces users to scroll both vertically and horizontally. Trying to read text or view images by scrolling in this way is difficult and potentially frustrating for users.

Content Assessment

Language use and content

1. The language for the site is very casual and colloquial. For example: “*Spirit would like to thank the many contributors and friends who help put this baby together. With your support in subscribing, advertising and partnering, we are able to produce Spirit Magazine and provide funds for our contributors. Remember brown skin rocks! Meegwetch!*” (Spirit Magazine, n.d.) Without further research it would be difficult to

judge if this type of language would appeal to the majority of *Spirit magazine* readers. The *Aboriginal Youth Network* and *SAY magazine* both target a similar audience, and their websites use similar language. However, while casual language may be appropriate for the target audience it could limit the appeal, of both the magazine and the site, to some users. Missing page content on the “In this Issue” and “Past Issues” page, make the site seem far less professional and could be potentially frustrating for users.

Hierarchy and Organization

The menu buttons are labeled clearly. Headings and sub-headings are consistent. Vertical space is also used consistently to separate headings and sub-headings. However, the hierarchy becomes confused because text headings are significantly larger than menu headings. Collages on each page also seem to dominate the site content taking away from the importance of the text. Content is not chunked well into clear sections and it seems there is overlap of content between the “Community” and the “About us” page.

Summary

Both the organization and the hierarchy of the site could do with improvement. The language use might appeal only to a narrow audience. Poor organization of content and confusion of visual hierarchy could make finding information on the magazine difficult. For example, finding information about the magazine’s mission was very difficult on the “About Spirit” page. Information on the current issue, back issues and contact information all precede information on the magazine’s creators and their philosophy.

Visual Assessment

Image use

The site is made up of a collage of images with elements like rough textured edges, glowing handprints, snapshots of young people and other decorative elements. Each page features a different collage. An extensive use of Adobe Photoshop filters to create glowing edges and drop shadows give the site a less professional more casual appearance. Most photographs look like candid snapshots; some images include photographs that show the Polaroid format. People are shown in both contemporary and traditional clothing, but the majority of images are of young adults wearing trendy clothing.

Text style

All text is aligned left and is sans-serif. Heading and menu items are in all caps. Text in both the menu and sub-menu is too small. Even users with normal vision would have trouble reading menu headings.

Media use/placement of media

Aside from photographs, no other media are used.

Colour

The website has highly saturated bright colour in various hues. The collages on each page each feature a slightly different colour scheme. Bright colour was probably selected to support the magazine creators' interest in communicating the notion that Canadian Aboriginal communities are active and vibrant. This type of colour palette may not appeal to a wide variety of audiences. Some viewers might see the range of rainbow hues in bright saturated colour as garish. The use of a range of rainbow hues in bright saturated colour could be seen as garish or lacking refinement.

(<http://www.spiritmag.ca/Spirit/About/index.html>)

Summary

The visual appearance of the site is similar to many other websites marketed to young adults. The bright colour and texture give it a visual energy and dynamism. Unfortunately the dominance of image over text seems to diminish the importance of the content. Strong varied colour, Photoshop filter effects and busy collages make this site somewhat visually chaotic.

Credibility

URL evaluation

The server domain has been reserved for the magazine which contributes to the site credibility. The .ca in the url indicates a Canadian website. The homepage url shows poor directory maintenance: <http://www.spiritmag.ca/Spirit/index/index.html> The homepage for the website should be as simple as www.spiritmag.ca. However, when "spiritmag.ca" is typed in to the browser the homepage does load.

Contact person, site creator background

Contact mail and email addresses are provided for the publisher, editor, advertising department and website designers.

The site was designed by an Aboriginal design group called The Thunderbird Group. A working link is provided to the company's website. As discussed above the inclusion of a splash screen shows a lack of knowledge of current usability literature on the part of the site's designers, a fact which reduces credibility of the design group that created the site.

Last update

There is no date to indicate when the last site update was completed. The fact that the magazine issue featured on the homepage is the current issue suggests that the site is being maintained fairly regularly. (Although the magazine is released quarterly.)

Resource links included

No resource links are provided. Links to other organizations are provided if those organizations are mentioned on the site.

Affiliation with institution or school

There is no official affiliation with any institution or school apparent. However, the community page states that the magazine is published from the Wasauksing First

Nation in Parry Sound Ontario. This affiliation lends some credibility to the claim that the site and the magazine were created and maintained by Aboriginal writers and designers.

Point of View

Both the website and magazine have been developed by Aboriginal staff for Aboriginal youth. The content is written to directly address this audience from an Aboriginal perspective. If this can be confirmed this does much to support the credibility of the information presented. One of the dangers of relying on websites claiming to be written by Aboriginal individuals for other Aboriginal people is that this claim is difficult to confirm.

Summary

The site shows magazine content with up to date contact information for magazine staff. This would seem to indicate that this website was created by and for the magazine's staff. Poor directory maintenance and missing content affect the credibility of both the magazine and the site designers. These problems all convey a lack of professionalism to the user.

Cultural Representation

Context

Visual reference to both contemporary and traditional life is shown; however, the focus is naturally on showing the contemporary life of Aboriginal youth and young adults. There is naturally a concentration of images of young people, but some images of older adults are also included. The mix of traditional and contemporary, young and old in collages and photographs create a diverse representation of Aboriginal people and cultures. The use of collage, with its layers and overlapping images helps to communicate complexity as well as diversity.

Visuals

The diversity discussed above is a key element of the visuals. While some elements could be conceived of as stereotypical, for example, the feather on the bottom of each page, the mix of images of youth in trendy or rebellious Western clothing creates an interesting juxtaposition that perhaps works against the potential stereotype. Whatever potential interpretations might arise, the representation of diversity is clear.

Language

The site and the magazine use English as the primary language. This may be because the magazine and the site are targeting many different Aboriginal cultures and English may be the most common language between all these different cultures.

Summary

Some may feel that the images are overworked and that the many Photoshop effects and filters create visual clutter that distract from the content. The representation of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures shown here is handled well, and is well balanced with the task of marketing to a young audience. Without being a member of the specific target group, it is difficult to assess the appeal of the site or the use of particular images for cultural representation. Nevertheless, the diversity represented by the images is certainly in line with recommendations from several sources that discuss methods for breaking stereotyping in the representation of Aboriginal culture.

References

Nielson, Jakob, (2000) *Designing Web Usability*, Indianapolis, IN:
New Riders Publishing.

Books Covers Selected for Session:

1. *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*, Tomson Highway
2. *Transitions: Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art*, Barry Ace
3. *Nothing But the Truth, An Anthology of Native American Literature*, John Purdy, James Ruppert (eds.)
4. *The Rez Sisters*, Tomson Highway
5. *The Long Dance*, David A. Groulx
6. *Bent Box*, Lee Maracle
7. *Skins – Contemporary Indigenous writing*, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damn
8. *My Heart is a Stray Bullet*, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damn
9. *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson
10. *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*, Alootook Ipellie
11. *The foot of the River*, George Lalor
12. *Spirit Horses*, Al Hunter
13. *The Native Creative Process: A collaborative Discourse between Douglas Cardinal and Jeannette Armstrong*, Jeannette Armstrong, Douglas Cardinal and Greg Young-Ing
14. *Almanac of the Dead*, Leslie Marmon Silko
15. *House Made of Dawn*, N. Scott Momaday
16. *Weesquachak and the Lost Ones*, Ruby Slipperjack
17. *Green Grass Running Water*, Thomas King

Image Exploration Session – July 19, 2005

Andrea Ruskin, MDes Candidate, Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta

PROTOCOL

1. Image analysis (book covers)

Welcome to the session this afternoon. Today we are going to be looking at several book covers and completing an analysis of those covers. I am asking you to complete this analysis because I am interested in what you think of the visual portrayal of Aboriginal Culture, but I am also interested in finding out what visual style appeals to you. This will help me to decide what the resource I am working on looks like, but also how you think traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture could be represented. mention diversity of cultures.

First we will look at the book covers for a few minutes, and then I will hand out a sheet for you to answer a few questions about the books. After you fill out the questions we'll have a short discussion about your perceptions of these covers. You'll have twenty minutes to fill out the questions and then we'll have a 30 min. discussion after.

2. Explanation of Question Sheet

- You will pick three books for each question based on their visual appearance only.
- You will then comment on your impression of the books you select.
- You will have 5 minutes for each of the three sections
- If you prefer, just make point form notes about each book and we'll talk about them in more detail later
- You can choose the same book more than once
- When I am using the words culturally appropriate, I mean that it expresses the culture in a respectful, honest way without inaccuracy or stereotype.

3. Discussion – possible questions.

- If any one book keeps being selected, ask more questions about why it was selected.
- Are there any books that don't appeal to you? Why?
- What did you think of this process of analyzing the book covers? What did you think was successful? What would you do differently?
- Is there another way you would prefer to go about discussing your visual preferences?
- Do you have any other questions?

July 19, 2005

Andrea Ruskin, MDes Candidate, Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta

SECTION ONE

Select three books that best convey a culturally appropriate view of contemporary Aboriginal culture. Use only visual criteria to make your selection.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on why you think this book is successful in portraying contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on why you think this book is successful in portraying contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on why you think this book is successful in portraying contemporary Aboriginal culture.

SECTION TWO

Select three books that best convey a culturally appropriate view of traditional Aboriginal culture. Use only visual criteria to make your selection.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on why you think this book is successful in portraying traditional Aboriginal culture.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on why you think this book is successful in portraying traditional Aboriginal culture.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on why you think this bookp is successful in portraying traditional Aboriginal culture.

SECTION THREE

Please select the three books that you find most visually appealing. (Imagine you had to select these books in a bookstore solely on their appearance.) Selecting visual elements only, (image style, text style, colour, etc.) comment on why each book appeals to you.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on two or three visual characteristics that appeal to you.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on two or three visual characteristics that appeal to you.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on two or three visual characteristics that appeal to you.

SECTION FOUR

Judging from the title only select three books that you think best suit the content. For example, you might think about whether or not the style of the image suits the title.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on two or three visual characteristics that suit the content.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on two or three visual characteristics that suit the content.

Book Number ____

Comment briefly on two or three visual characteristics that suit the content.



Students were given time to examine the book covers before the session began.



Students answered questions individually in the written portion of the session



After the written portion a short discussion followed

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